

THE EXHIBITIONIST

I uncovered my date's true identity by accident one evening while she was in the shower. I guessed that "Shanterelle" was her own invention, although the reason for taking a misspelled mushroom name escaped me. I was looking for a pen to circle movie times in the paper for our evening out, when I opened her nightstand drawer and found Army dog tags stamped with her serial number and given name. I saved that information for later. In a few days, I was standing in her apartment holding a magazine while she was in the kitchen, preparing drinks and snacks.

"Anything I can help you with in there, Louise?"

In the corner of my eye, I caught rapid motion, just before she went airborne and into my upper body with a linebacker's lunge. The impact carried us over the back of her slick vinyl couch with her on top and me, not in position to go much of anywhere. Hot, wet sex was followed by a baby talk special request.

"Never call me by that name again," came from the lips pressed against my ear. "Promise?"

"Ung-kay," was the sound I heard gurgle up from my throat, "it's a deal."

"Ever dated a sister before?"

"Sure," I lied. "Why?"

"You're for damn sure my first old white man."

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About a month earlier, my lawyer suggested a request from the 'other side,' to meet with a marriage counselor, might serve 'my long term interest.' Don't get me wrong, I was glad to have Will's representation, although it put my old buddy in an awkward position. Will had known me and Angie for twenty-some years.

"Sure you wouldn't want to be represented by someone else?" he asked. "One of the other competent partners here?" I was cautious, looking out for me while trying not offend anybody else. Divorce lawyers take their fair share of grief in Wedlock, Texas anyway.

“No, I trust you. And those other guys,” I didn’t know how to say it, “Act like they think they’re smarter than me. Better than me.”

“Well now, Jim Gordon,” Will cocked back in his chair, “Think you’re going through a mid-life crisis? Middle-aged crazy?”

“Ha!” came out too loud. “Middle? I might have to respectfully disagree. Ain’t no way I’m living to ninety-six.”

“I can’t figure it out. Do you mind telling me what happened between you and Angela?”

I couldn’t talk around what Will already knew. Weeks before, he tried to talk me out of it. “The attractive, practical, accountant wife who grew your homegrown printing venture into a successful business?”

“It’s just that, she’s holding me back.” The words tumbled out hollow.

“Whoa!” Will forced a wide-eyed blink for emphasis. “You working odd hours printing late editions, her taking classes to finish her MBA. Holding you back from what?”

With fingertips pressed over my closed eyes, I guess I was praying for a good answer that never came to me. “From having other women.”

I still think about a way to tell this story where I come out half-way decent. After years of working my ass up from a small time, blue-collar nobody, I wanted to show them all something. Back when I started, in a metal shed behind the house, cattle grazed in the empty fields around my place. Now it takes an hour drive in any direction to see a peaceful sight like that. All around me, new hotshot neighbors threw up mini-mansions financed at the crest of their Enron stock.

Once the term, ‘corporate raiders,’ was derogatory. But then, in the fresh year 2000, the new Sun Belt economy seemed to reach out to everybody with open arms. When I sold Flash Printing to a national publishing company, AdCorp, they hired me back to retain my clients.

All those years, Angie did the books from home, put dinner on the stove and sorted mail at the kitchen table. Maybe watching the city eat countryside in aggressive bites made her think about getting out of Wedlock. In the drawer under the phone I found brochures she requested from retirement communities in Destin, Boca Raton.

She'd watch for the van to pull in the driveway, my name on the driver's door, with stubby lightning bolts on either side of "Flash Gordon." After years of prepping car ads, I knew what I wanted. That day Angela saw the Mercedes convertible pull in the driveway, she didn't expect what came with it.

I said the word, 'divorce.' Our little house was just about paid off. That and half the proceeds from sale of the business were hers. I thought I was cutting her a pretty good deal. There would be details at tax time but the bottom line was, we'd be filing separate returns.

It came out like I practiced and Angie sat there listening, chin in hand, elbow on the kitchen table, waiting for a punch line that never came.

"Well," she exhaled long and slow, "isn't that some shit?"

I caught myself nodding involuntarily in agreement. "I just can't decide whether I should leave tonight. Or in the morning."

Angie took steps toward the hallway and called back over her shoulder. "Think you can make that decision by the time I get your suitcase from the attic?"

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The counselor said she wanted to see us separately for the first session. It hadn't occurred to me there would be more than one. On my day, a slender little thirty-something brunette came in and sat across the coffee table. Hemmed in among a rectangle of couches and lounge chairs, I don't mind saying, really put me on edge. One wall behind her hung with diplomas and certificates. The other had kitten pictures with cute sayings in a swirly font. Her remarks rolled out like a theme-park tour guide spiel. She held up images on cardstock and asked for my first response.

"Imagine this one," she held card fourteen, "sitting on the table in front of you. Would you see the glass as half empty, or half full?"

"I'll tell you one goddam thing. If that's my glass, it ain't nothing full about it." That first session was my last.

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I rented an aging townhome closer to the AdCorp office with the notion to make it a swinging bachelor pad, crib, or whatever new name they went by. I would try to resurrect the rugged young man from the pictures on my office walls. The owl-eyed, slack-jawed, aging white man I saw shaving in the mirror wasn't him.

People said success changed me, but despite all that, I couldn't shake the sense that people still saw me as the unsophisticated little man, with inked fingernails and an empty space where an education should be. I wanted to all strip that away, show them what was underneath. No, I never went to college. I read a lot, though. That's a big part of the printing business.

Television specials on the fading twentieth century recapped all the partying I missed. Instead, I'd worked my ass off, through a demanding apprenticeship to establish myself in the trade. Memories of all those late-night hours hung around me like ghosts from my evaporated youth. I would need some plan to join the dating game in the new millennium.

For years I worked with alternative weekly newspapers, developing the profitability of their "Personals" section. I was fascinated with how people described themselves in those ads, at the base price for 300 characters or less. I thought more research might clue me in.

At first it was disappointing. Disturbing, even. Turns out the term, forty-ish, was code for fifty-ish. I knew enough Photoshop to recognize altered emailed images. I was about to give up when I connected with Shanterelle. At first, the only thing we had in common was that she was about to give up on the personals, too. We clicked over the phone though and our first date, as it happened, celebrated her twenty-sixth birthday.

She checked out as advertised; 5'4" tall, 135 pounds and didn't mind repeating, two army tours left her without enough body fat to calculate. Like she told me on the phone, her skin was as dark as anyone she ever met. I still think about how amazing she looked naked, round muscular limbs like the shapes carnival vendors twist from tubular balloons. During a hearty parting hug that night, I realized she could probably kill me with her bare hands. Her sweet disposition kept that thought at bay. I'd want to see her again.

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I missed the answering machine message, returning my call. She spoke her name, Esther, in a pronounced British accent. She'd like to know more about me. I had responded to many personals but couldn't recall an Esther. I took ads saved from Metro Free Press with me to breakfast at Denny's to look over the ones I had circled.

"Nigerian Princess," it read, "raised and schooled in England." The next line stated she looked like Sade. "Seeks mature male companionship." It seemed like a light shined through from behind the page right then and I silently mouthed the words, "That's me."

Esther Oni was long and statuesque, paler and taller than me in spike heels, with no crisis in confidence. When we agreed to meet outside a popular, upscale restaurant, she asked how she would recognize me.

"I'll be driving a red convertible. How about you?"

"Oh, you'll know me," she said. "I look like Sade."

In the parking lot, I spotted her on the terrace. There was, indeed, a remarkable resemblance to the popular singer, but later I would notice substantial differences; a more curvaceous figure, fierce eyes, and wide breasts whose weight swayed them strikingly to each side when freed from her brassiere.

In the weeks that followed, whenever we went out, Esther was noticed. Heads turned as if looking for cameras shooting a cosmetics commercial. Booked restaurants were somehow able to find us a table by a front window, and catching a cab was never a problem. Even though I could rarely catch her in a decent mood, I hurt like a hormone-struck teenager to see her again. And again.

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I had rational moments when it seemed I couldn't juggle two girlfriends. Then, some other internal voice told me I was just making up for lost time. It was our mix of schedules though, that allowed it happen.

Shanterelle took classes at the downtown university branch and was night inventory manager at the nearby Car World. Esther worked rotating evening shifts at a geriatric hospital.

They thought I was on call around the clock, often summoned to production meetings at odd hours. I could meet one or pull a fast excuse for the other as needed.

Car World did big business at the sprawling southwest location and sometimes paid cash bonuses to the managerial staff. When Shanterelle would get one, we'd meet for drinks and late dinner at Pablo's Cajun Fusion Cuisine across the freeway. She delighted in picking up the tab. That Pablo location was older and fancy. Horseshoe-shaped booths with plush, button-upholstered seats. When I closed a contract, dinner was on me. It was hard for me to use the name, Shanterelle. With "Louise" out of consideration, I called her "Baby."

I have to admit, I began to wonder if Esther was worth the trouble. Her usual mood was, "annoyed," and she could find fault or cast slights with little reason. It was like I was somewhat less than what a prize like her should command. She was never particularly affectionate, either. The first time wasn't enthusiastic and from then on, sex for her seemed like some regrettable, unfortunate obligation.

She was such a showpiece, figuring her out was a challenge I couldn't let go. I told myself it might be a culturally different, hard-to-please dating strategy. That didn't stop me from trying. At every opportunity, I massaged my face into the rich, café au lait curves of her passive, erotic figure, but never found her sweet spot.

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One Wednesday at work I received a call from Karen, one of my wife's old friends, who asked if we could meet for lunch. I remembered a sexy vibe from Karen once and, according to the way I thought about things then, figured she just might want some. I looked down at my new silk tie and matching pocket square and suggested we meet at Pablo's. I waited on the terrace as her car pulled in the parking lot. It wasn't until I saw her picture on the magnetic door sign that I remembered she was a realtor.

Before their food was served, I put thirty-two signatures on documents authorizing sale of Angela's house for three times what we paid for it. Angie's part, my sweet, practical Angie's part, to execute the contract was already complete. The last page had her signature on a line above an address in Florida.

“Too busy for a social life?” Karen asked over lunch. “Or are you seeing other people?” I nodded in the affirmative. In a coy tone of voice, she asked if maybe a mid-life crisis was leading me to date younger women.

“Yeah, maybe that’s it.” It seemed like a topic best left unexplored.

“How much younger?” She turned slightly, looking from the corner of one eye.

“I dunno. On average, twenty-five.”

“Wow,” Karen said, with a short turn of her head and a long focus on some vanishing point across the parking lot, “I guess everybody’s looking for something.”

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My AdCorp colleagues had names they called me, though never to my face. I returned that courtesy by never allowing myself to utter the words “smart-ass punk” out loud. Still, overhearing someone mention “the relic” left little doubt. With the company picnic coming up, I planned to show them something, change the conversation.

The party planners picked ‘The Hoedown,’ which was little more than a few tin roofs on creosoted poles. It’s supposed to remind people of the city’s gateway-to-the-west, rodeo heritage. Groups rented tables, brought potluck dishes, listened to country music and floated kegs.

We parked in a freshly mowed field and started walking toward the covered areas. Esther wore these tall wedge, cork heel shoes with open toes and a tight, brilliant blue dress, showing lots of cleavage and slit above one mid-thigh. Her lips and nail color were a deep hot hue and, as those red tipped toes cut through the loose hay, visitors seated on tailgates looked around like an entourage might follow.

“Glad I caught you, Jimbo.” It was Regional Vice-President Taylor Malkin, a snarky punk who I figure wise-assed his way up the organizational chart before I came on board. He was leaving the gathering, after a brief show of support. “We need you at the trade show next week. Something came up and the CEO and I can’t make it.” Taylor was addressing me while his eyes were undressing Esther. “Sylvia will fill you in Monday on your reservations and details. Convention Center and Exhibition Hall in Dallas.”

“All righty, then,” a phrase I don’t think I’d ever used before, somehow came slipping out of me right then. “I’m a conventioneer from way back!”

“And, they tell me, an exhibitionist par excellence.” Taylor touched the brim of his nylon fedora and nodded at Esther. I watched cautiously as he stepped away. I always had the feeling he used foreign phrases as some kind of joke on me.

My co-workers, most dressed in western boots and jeans, made a show of cordiality to Esther. She responded to their polite overtures as if they spit when they talked, and stared at the homemade casseroles like they were bowls of shit from untold origins.

That afternoon spawned one of those lucid moments. Nothing I could do would ever bring an end to Esther’s accomplished bitch act. It wasn’t driven by wining and dining or nights on the town. It was about immigration status.

I realized she was definitely driven though, looking to land a husband of the American persuasion. Remembering details from the things she told me, I figured the last pages of her visa expiration calendar were turning. She asked twice when she might see my finalized divorce documents and, I guess, was way too proud to ask again.

Within a week after the traumatic night at Pablo’s that ends this story, when I was suddenly exposed, Esther was too. It was our last conversation. The tipping point came when I floated the words “green card” into the empty space between us.

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In retrospect, going to Dallas was what set the disaster in motion. Taylor’s secretary scheduled me for three days at the biennial trade expo to hype new services and participate in a panel discussion with competing firms. If successful, it could be a new direction for AdCorp. My last trade show was long past, but I had a lifetime of built-up confidence and five days to prepare. There were specifications to memorize and talking points to develop.

I called Shanterelle and told her how busy I’d been. “Crazy at work,” I said, “and I’ll be out of town for a few days. Call you when I get back, baby.”

The convention's theme was "Moving with the Millennium." Mine turned out to be personal disaster. After the first hour, I stepped out to the restroom accompanied by my swagger, but coming back to the main ballroom floor, it seemed I was alone. Trade shows used to be my thing. Long legs strutted in high heels and fish net stockings, passing out business cards, logo pens, and refrigerator magnets. Sharp dressed men glad-handed and talked up product lines. Girls in short velvet skirts and bell hop caps carried cigars, cigarettes and wrapped, hard candies in trays all wedged up under eye-catching cleavage. Break time meant bourbon and seven in the lobby, with several more to follow before dinner. That was then.

These people drank coffee from paper cups in cardboard sleeves and some kind of iced tea in painted bottles. I looked around for anyone else wearing a suit, or even a tie. The guys in other booths wore jeans and loud sneakers, with shirt tails hanging out like they missed out on some home training. They spoke in clipped, short vowels and those who commented on my 'accent,' looked at me from then on like I just might be stupid.

I sat silently on the dais during the Q. and A. session. Everyone talked in acronyms I couldn't decipher or understand. Nervous about my turn coming up, I planned to use an old fallback ice-breaker that always worked.

"Hello, everybody," I would say into the microphone and introduce myself. "Anybody out there heard of Wedlock, Texas?" An enthusiastic, "Yeah," or whistle would fly from somewhere in the crowd. "Well," it's the grin, I think, that always wins them over, "I was born just outside Wedlock." I'd have to pause at that point, waiting for rippling chuckles to dissipate, before launching into my sales pitch.

But when I tried it at the convention, the last 'Wedlock' fell like a single raindrop in an empty water barrel. The only sound across the expanse of the conference room was the tap and jabs of fingers on electronic devices. My pause, scanning the crowd for a connection, lasted long enough for heads to lift from their laps and look around for the disturbance.

The rest of the session didn't go any better. It was clear our competitors had better products and processes. Something else was clear to me. That's exactly why I was sent. My unopened suitcase never came out of the trunk and I started the drive home later that afternoon.

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Tired and disappointed, the rhythm of the road made it seem like a quiet evening over a good meal might straighten me out. I knew Shanterelle planned to attend a concert with friends that night. She had wanted me to go, showed me the tickets ten days in advance, for an act I'd never heard of called Frankie Beverly and Maze. "Can't, Baby. I'll be at the convention that night." Esther was off on Tuesdays. The mistake came in calling ahead for a dinner date.

I craved familiar comfort and, once at home, knew where to call. I was becoming a regular. I knew the servers, the menu, and even the table number of the isolated booth we preferred in a quiet back corner of the restaurant.

"Thank you for calling Pablo's. Can you hold please?" I recognized the voice.

"Sure, not a prob . . .," I was interrupted by an interval of smooth jazz for a few minutes until the voice came back.

"Party of two. Gordon. 8:30." I added the request, "in booth twenty-five?"

"Perfect," she said, and I nodded on the other end of the phone, thinking the same.

I freshened up but decided to stay in the new suit I'd been wearing all day. I splashed some water on my face, swilled mouthwash, and brushed my teeth. The contact lenses were scratchy but I used some eye drops and left them in. Esther said wearing glasses made me look ancient.

The restaurant's small room was packed with a party celebrating a special occasion, but the hostess saved our booth. A copy-shop banner on the back wall congratulated "Phil and Alice - Happy Fiftieth Anniversary from Car World." Candles in tiny lanterns and floral centerpieces dotted tables throughout the room. Esther and I were escorted to the back right corner. We slid into the booth, little more than arm's length from the gentleman seated at the head of the longest table. His yellow knit shirt had "Phil," embroidered over the pocket with the Car World logo. All the yellow shirts around the room almost made me panic. Then I remembered Shanterelle's concert that night.

I have to give it to her. Esther looked stunning. She could do amazing things with a simple, cut up black dress and oversized, round silver accessories. She told me she attended a fashion design institute during her time in London, though another time I think she said it was

Manchester. As we looked at menus, in a break with tradition, she mentioned how good I looked that night, too, running her nails up my lapel and caressing the fabric between thumb and fingers.

We could see most of the party activity and hear much of the conversation. Some folks, away from the main table, did their best to suck up drinks on someone else's tab. Just inside the door, a toddler in a booster chair gnawed the remnants of a hush puppy while an older sibling kept dabbing a discarded lemon slice in her ear hole. Phil took a congratulatory card from its envelope and held it out, thanking someone for the warm sentiments. I was close enough to have taken it from his hand.

When our wine was poured, I began to relax. Esther preferred red high-end vintages toward the bottom of the page. Trying to crawl out from under a long day disillusioning day, I reached to gently cover Esther's hand on the table with mine. In a gesture which, for her, was damn near amorous foreplay, she turned her hand over and squeezed back.

I leaned back and, after slowly stretching my neck over each shoulder, found myself staring straight at the couple pictured around the room. Phil looked like a successful working man like me, his wife sitting there all classy and regal, the way my Angie looked when we got dressed up. Tent-cards in the center of tables touted the monumental task of staying married to the same person for fifty years.

In the soft candle glow, I saw an aura around the elderly couple, a contentment, a grace and dignity free of pretension. The deep pool of their lives seemed unfathomable from the shallow pond where I found myself sitting, watching. I was blinking clear of those daydreams when the jolt came.

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It would be a while after that night before all the details came together for me. I never expected to hear from Shanterelle again, but a couple months later, she called me from out of state. She hadn't gone to that concert with her friends. Two employees called in sick at the last minute. She cleaned and detailed several cars herself. Afterward, there was still time to drop in at the anniversary party for Phil, General Manager who hired her, right across the freeway at Pablo's.

She was calling me from Little Rock, transferred to a position at a start-up location. It was a promotion for her but that night she was lonely, somewhat drunk. She said she forgave and missed me and, for the next fifteen minutes, led me through a kind of phone sex tutorial. Would I come up there and see her over the weekend? The sad shame of that last night at Pablo's still hovered around me like an oily mist. I wished I could but, "no, too much going on at work." I hung up, feeling serious stabs of regret before my hand was even off the phone.

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The bustle of servers distributing salads that night was the likely distraction, but I didn't see Shanterelle until her thighs were pressed against the edge of our table. The mix and intensity of emotion in her face was something I can never un-see. My palms rolled up from the table like overturned starfish at low tide. My jaw moved in the disjointed orbits of a patient awakening from anesthesia. Shanterelle's head shifted side-to-side, index finger pointing at the ceiling, waving like a metronome set on andante. My mouth hung dumb to deliver an explanation that would not come.

"Don't even try." She leaned toward him. "You can't lie to me." Further explanation came in the same breath, but louder tone. "I have seen you naked." The phrase had a pop culture ring, a sitcom punchline like I was expected to know but could not place. I could see my frozen, blank expression reflected in each flash of her angry eyes.

The sting of my humiliation didn't prevent me from sensing her embarrassment, as well. I always appreciated her sharp, fresh look when we dated, but knew it came from careful cosmetic effort. She hadn't prepared for this accidental encounter.

Her coarse hair bore the mold of a Car World cap, pulled tight to just above her eyebrows. Her yellow shirt, tied up to miss soap spray, revealed glimpses of her tight, dark stomach. The white plaid shorts stretched across her muscular behind, the red high-top running shoes told a tale of their own.

Only those seated close to the unfolding scene heard her initial comment but, that soon changed. A quiet fell over the room as the audience watched an absurd drama unfold. On center

stage, Shanterelle took a deep breath and repeated louder, closer to my face, “I have SEEN YOU NAKED.” Few in the room missed it the second time around.

A fork tapped a water glass somewhere, reminding the crowd a party was still in session. Intelligible sounds had yet to come from me as the contents of my full wine glass washed through my hair, across my forehead, and continued downstream. Cabernet ran through my clothes and bled out through the table linen like a gangster movie murder scene. I froze, trying to minimize the splash of dripping liquid. Shanterelle held the empty glass by the stem and delicately set it on the table.

“No, no, Flash Gordon.” Her head rolled back to roar. “I have seen . . .” Something within whatever she had seen, had set her free. She turned and quickly moved away, her muscular thighs pumping like firing pistons on a direct path to the exit sign.

“You go, girl,” came a cry that scattered light, laughter and sporadic applause across the room. Another called out, “Amen.”

I didn’t know what to expect, turning to Esther. The smug expression spoke for her. She was puffed up and beaming, as if the actions of the dark, disheveled, unsophisticated American girl demonstrated Esther’s vast superiority.

Wine draining down my face curled a contact lens into the corner of my left eye. Fishing it out from my eyelid, I could feel the unblinking focus of the room. I looked up and, with my good eye, saw Phil staring a few feet away. I knew I had to apologize, but couldn’t think of any words, then or now, to make things right. Phil raised a hand to silence me, rocked it gently, side to side. He spoke after a moment, tired empathy in his voice, a subtle smile in his eyes.

“Not necessary, son,” he said. “I guess we’ve all seen you naked.”

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