

THAT THING FOR WHAT'S IN BETWEEN ALL THE STUFF

Poppy Duveen's the one who brought condoms to Hermit Crab Healthfoods. Oh sure, the coolers were still full of quark, bulk bins brimming with bulgur, supplement shelves lined with Bach Flower Essences—but, less than two weeks after Poppy took over, one end-cap display was all condoms. Seven racks full of them, all brands and varieties, right alongside the yohimbe and homeopathic calendula.

“There's not too much vitamins and healthfoods can do to prevent STDs,” she'd tell customers as she sold them their oat groats and esterified vitamin C. “Think of it this way: condoms as sexual supplement.”

One sunny June morning, after ringing up two quarts of kefir and a case of special-order non-prescription Danish female condoms for a yoga teacher who'd driven all the way from Tallahassee, Poppy glanced through the open front window of the store, right onto the shallow reaches of Hermit Crab Bay. Barely twenty feet out stood a skinny blond fellow, knee-deep in

baywater, his khaki pants soaked to the seat. Poppy groaned. The skinny guy was her younger brother Sam, just flunked out of his third try at college and back home in Hermit Crab for the summer. Poppy worried about Sam for reasons far beyond his flunking out of college and swimming in his clothes. "Look at him out there," she muttered. "Alone. He's *always* alone." As far as five years of therapy had enabled her to see it, the erratic parenting of their country-clubbing parents had produced in Sam a nearly pathological state of social withdrawal. She remembered him, barely three, whirling around and around their candle-lit dining room until he passed out from dizziness and second-hand smoke.

"Lil' dancin' babe's in a worl' all his own," their mother had slurred, sipping her fifth double vodka gimlet and dragging hard on her Kent, while down on the carpet, eight-year-old Poppy frantically slapped his cheeks to bring him to.

Over the years, ever-mindful of the powers of suggestion, Poppy had hinted, cajoled, even wished right out loud for Sam to find someone he'd let into his world, someone he could truly love. On his birthdays, she'd given him huge variety-packs of healthfood store condoms wrapped in red velvet with gold satin ribbons, silver sequins, and quartz crystals to concentrate the love current, but he'd never seemed even the slightest bit interested.

"I've got other things on my mind," he said.

Evidently, Poppy thought, her face against the window screen, what he's got on his mind right now is breathing. She watched him as he stood in the bay, tossed his head back, and inhaled. He splashed through the shallows, breathing deeper and deeper. "I inhale and leave the world spinning in a vacuum," she heard him shout. "I exhale typhoons and tornadoes, with an arctic howl and a sand-filled desert hiss!" He threw his arms out, panting like an overheated

greyhound. “*This wind brings the breath of Aphrodite straight from Olympus!*” he yelled, then he flopped, face first, into the foamy green bay.

Poppy sighed. The store fell quiet. She opened a bottle of Bach Red Chestnut Essence. On the wall behind the counter, the clock measured out the minutes as her wish ticked on and on: “A love for Sam, a love for Sam, a love for Sam.”

He was a gangling young man with a long straight nose, lank white-blond hair, and eyes the color of dry beach sand. Poppy looked just like him, but colored in—hennaed and tattooed and suntanned. Sam was pale beige all over.

While Poppy squeezed juice from organic blood oranges, Sam floated in the bay, breathing the breath of the universe. She wished in rhythm to the squeezing of the juicer: “A love for Sam, a love for Sam, a love for Sam...”

The next morning—exhaling in puffs, a final small whirlwind—Sam once again waded into Hermit Crab Bay. The sun shone, the breeze blew, the water sparkled with whitecaps. Sam crouched in the shallows, sea grass thick around him, and scooped a small, brown-striped scallop from the muddy bottom. “While it *is* true,” he conceded, “that all scallops have scores of neon blue eyes inside their shells, I’ve found the eyes of our homegrown Hermit variety to be especially fine.” He held the scallop close, just inches from his face. Gazing into the multiple brilliant blue eyes right inside her slow-opening shell, he crooned, “Your eyes, my lovely, upset my senses. They fill me right up with awe!”

Beige-eyed Sam was a sucker for that blue. He pulled a 100x magnifying glass from his pocket and held it over the scallop, focusing the enlarged images upon her many eyes. “Behold,” he whispered, “the hundred-fold magnified vision of sandpipers the size of elephants and clumps

of sea oats towering four stories tall!” He jiggled the lens over the scallop. “I’m certain this moment of increased perception will change you,” he murmured. “These heightened images streaming through your scallop nerve and sinew will bring you enlightenment and make you a princess among scallops—or, at the very least, some sort of mystic priestess.”

Now, even though none of them could possibly have known it—not Sam, not Poppy, and definitely not the third party—on that shining bright morning, Sam was about to fall in love. And it wasn’t with the iridescent eyes of a shellfish or the nebulous breath of Aphrodite on the wind. It was with a real, live girl.

The girl Sam was about to fall for wouldn’t believe she’d been wished for by Poppy or anyone else. If she’d known it, she’d have snorted a bad-tempered laugh. “Bullshit!” she’d have spat. “I’m not worth wishing for.” And it’s not that she had particularly low self-esteem. She didn’t think anything was worth wishing for. She didn’t think anything was much of anything—just aimless electrons and empty space.

Her name was Claudia Moon, and she was a plump, doughy girl with blue eyes, brown hair, and a revolving wardrobe of six poly-cotton thriftstore muumuus. After an unsuccessful six months at an all-girls’ college in Atlanta, and another five as a back-office medical transcriptionist for Hermit County Gastroenterology, she’d flung herself headlong into a swamp of existential dejection. At the end of a long day transcribing, she’d slouch at her keyboard, chain-smoking Camels, muttering a mantra of dissatisfaction: “*Life is all a bunch of crap.*” Perfectly reasonable requests, such as “Hey, Claudia, would you hand me that pen?” assaulted her senses like chainsaws on steel. “You may think it’s a pen,” she’d yell, “but to ME it’s a meaningless heap of subatomic CRAP.” Then, to make matters worse, she’d usually flat-out

refuse to hand it over: “Pen? What pen? Jam all the solid matter in that thing together, it’d fit on the head of a *pin*.”

Relations around the office deteriorated. Finally, in June, the senior gastroenterologist took her aside. “Sweetheart, what’s the problem? I’d like to help.”

“You’re full of crap,” she told him. “That’s the problem.”

The next day, the office manager fired her.

“Oh, who cares?” Claudia said.

For three days after that, she stayed in bed in her efficiency apartment, tossing and turning and swatting mosquitoes.

“What a bunch of crap,” she muttered. “Shitty apartment with shitty broken window screens.”

The morning of that fourth day dawned breezy and bright, weather so brilliant, so gleaming, so glitteringly cheerful even Claudia could only drum up bad attitude through anticipation of sunburn and glare headache. She rolled out of bed, squirted Bactine over her mosquito bites, threw on a wrinkled orange and purple muumuu, and set off to find something to eat.

Taco Bell, she thought. Or maybe Bojangles.

Her car wouldn’t start. “Piece of 97 Honda lousy CRAP!” she yelled.

Hermit Crab Healthfoods was only a block from Claudia’s apartment. Being mostly a fast food/frozen dinner type of girl, she’d never been there. But that day, she stalked up and went inside.

“...there's cracked wheat in it, and sunflower seeds,” Poppy was saying to Sam as he stood, sopping wet, dripping baywater onto the baked goods counter. She looked up at Claudia. “Can I help you?”

Claudia said, “I don't suppose you have breakfast burritos, do you?” She scrutinized the shelves behind Poppy, upon which were displayed an array of freshly baked organic fruit pies. “Or maybe a pie,” she said. “Yeah, a peach pie.”

Poppy picked up a pie and stuck it into a waxed paper bag. “Hand me that pen, would you, hon?” she asked, pointing to the felt-tipped marker she used to price bakery items.

Claudia grabbed the pen from the counter. Her dejection flying on autopilot, she muttered, “To *you* it may be a pen, but to me it's a meaningless pile of subatomic crap careening through empty space.”

Sam exhaled with a huge rushing whoosh. “And to *me*,” he cried, “to me, the pen's the WHOLE BOOK.”

And maybe it really was because of all Poppy's wishing, or maybe it was just random luck—a chance limbic system misfire or a dopamine surge—but, when Claudia turned to look at Sam, her blue eyes sent shock waves straight through his head. They ricocheted off the inside of his skull, shot through his heart, tingled his toes, and left him reeling. For Sam, it was definitely love at first sight.

Dumbstruck and dizzy, he trailed Claudia home. The next day, he showed up on her stoop with a second peach pie and three organic avocados from Poppy's produce section. When Claudia opened the door, he cleared his throat, squared his shoulders, and made the pronouncement he been silently rehearsing for almost twenty-four hours. “Hello,” he said. “I'm Sam Duveen and I'd like to declare my intentions.”

“Your intentions to do what?” she snapped. “Sell me a bunch of crap? Vacuums or saucepans or World Book Encyclopedias?”

“No!” he cried. “You don’t understand. I’m not a salesman. What my intentions are—well, what I *want* is, I want to be your boyfriend.”

“Riiiiight,” she drawled. “That busybody gastroenterologist put you up to this, didn’t he? Or was it the transcriptionists? ‘*I want to be your boyfriend,*’” she mimicked in a mincing falsetto that had nothing in common with Sam’s low-pitched delivery.

“What gastroenterologist?” Sam asked.

Claudia stared at him. “Hey,” she said finally. “You’re the guy from the healthfood store.”

Sam nodded.

“You got excited about the pen. ‘*The whole book,*’ you said.”

He nodded again. “I tend to see possibilities everywhere.” He thrust the pie and the avocados into her hands and gave her a jaunty wave. “Well, see you tomorrow.”

He came back the next day with cherry pie and green beans. The day after that, he had apple pie and eggplant. On the fourth day, he brought strawberry pie and a bouquet of sunflowers, each stem over three feet tall.

“Those sure are some big-ass flowers,” Claudia said, her voice soft, carefully wending its way past the huge, boisterous giggle she felt bubbling up in her chest.

On the fifth day he arrived, bramble-scratched, with brownies and wild blackberries.

On the sixth day, he had zinnias and jalapeno peppers.

“Hey, thanks,” she said. “I really like hot stuff. Maybe I’ll make pepper jelly. You ever had it? My mom makes it. You eat it with cream cheese and crackers.”

(“*Jelly?*” she wondered. “What’s the matter with me?”)

On the seventh day, as he stood at her door with zucchini bread and shelled pecans, a caterwauling *meeeeow* broke through the undergrowth beside her driveway.

Sam spun around. “Buster, I told you to stay home!”

A scrawny orange cat slunk out from behind a clump of oleander. He deposited two dead moles at Sam’s feet and retreated into the bushes. Within seconds, he’d returned with three mice.

“Yikes,” said Claudia.

“I know,” Sam groaned. “The cat’s a hunting machine.” He pulled a folded Ziploc bag from his pocket and bagged the rodents. “But he doesn’t much like the taste of them raw.”

“So you *cook* them for him?”

“Of course not!” Sam said. “I give them to my neighbor. He’s got snakes...”

Unfortunately, the existence of Doug Bateman’s five albino pythons didn’t deter local gossips any. Poppy had heard them, eyewitnesses to her brother’s painstaking retrieval of Buster’s kill, trading stories at the post office, the drugstore, and the library: “Sure he cooks ‘em! In cream sauce. ‘Creamed Mouse on Croissants’—that’s what’s for dinner at Screwball Sam’s. On Sundays, it’s ‘Cream of Mole Stew.’”

The librarian, an elderly woman with an open mind and a tender heart, defended him:

“You know, he’s really not quite as odd as everyone thinks--”

“Oh, yes he is!” library patrons said. “That boy’s pure-tee wacko. Get this—he goes out looking for starfish to *amputate*. He cuts a leg off each one he finds and says...uh, what’s that he says again, Miz Sophie?”

The librarian examined her ink-stained fingernails. “He says, ‘If I do it enough, regeneration may be postponed and, with the final destruction of radial symmetry, manlike, they may rise and walk.’”

The patrons groaned. “See what we mean? What a bozo!”

But Sam didn't really expect an army of starfish to come marching towards him, upright and mobile. And, no matter what library patrons said, he never envisioned starfish in Bermuda shorts and sneakers pushing baskets of starfish-food in suburban starfish grocery stores. Sam simply liked starfish, and, because he liked them, he wanted to give them a leg *up* the evolutionary ladder by taking a leg *from* their bodies. He said, “The bilateral symmetry of four appendages is, after all, far more advanced than the radial symmetry of five.”

On the seventh day, he brought lemon pie and basil. On the eighth, blueberry cobbler and yellow squash.

With strict, single-minded intent—augmented by Poppy's baked goods and organic produce—Sam snuck his affections right up on Claudia. Before she'd even noticed, he'd become a habit. And, as habits go, he was infinitely more comforting than existential dejection ever had been. She started to fret: “He looks tired, he's so pale, he never eats right.” Sam was precisely the cure Claudia's disgruntled spirit had needed. How could she think everything was crap when she worried so much that his feet might be cold?

She bought him bedroom slippers and galoshes, wool socks and fishing boots. “Oh, what a beautiful morning!” she'd bellow, wading barefoot through the shallows beside him.

At precisely three-thirty-three on the night of the twenty-first day, Sam crawled through Claudia's torn window screen, over the sill, into her bedroom. She looked up to see him standing, pale blue in the moonlight, a 100x magnifying glass in his hand.

"I knew you'd be awake," he said, lying down beside her.

Then he aimed his magnifying glass out the window, straight into the sky, and focused the images of infinite space—moons, planets, and stars—all over her body.

"I'm certain convinced sensory experiences can effect evolution of the spirit on a subatomic level," he explained.

"Oh, yeah?" she said. "Well, jam all the subatomic stuff in me together and it'd fit--"

"Sssshh," he whispered. "This is for what's in *between* all the stuff."

She leaned back and closed her eyes.

"Feel it?" he whispered. "That shimmer? That tiny jolt? That's your spirit expanding."

Maybe it was a weird kind of lovemaking, but really, who's to judge? One thing's certain: if Sam made the scallop a princess with that magnifying glass of his, he made Claudia a flat-out queen.

The next morning, Poppy was stocking the shelves with damiana, black cohosh, and Okamoto condoms when she looked out the window and saw Sam and Claudia knee-deep in bay water. Claudia glowed in a hot pink muumuu. Pale skinny Sam was positively rosy in her reflection.

Poppy knew what was on their minds as they stood in the bay. They were breathing. Together, they threw their heads back and inhaled.

"I'm breathing saffron from the plains of India!" Sam cried.

"And gardenias on the heavy, warm wind of Savannah!" yelled Claudia.

Then they stood, arm in arm, soaking wet, their spirits expanding so white-hot and explosive Poppy could practically see it, like fireworks, over the bay.

end