

HE OFFERED TRIALS  
HEALTH  
THE FEMINIST  
COMEDIC ROMANCE  
HE PROPOSED  
BORN. AGAIN  
GROSS HUMANS  
AIN'T NOTHING LIKE  
NEW YORK ROMANCE

THE  
CHEAT  
SHEET

STORIES ABOUT  
THE SEXES, SEX,  
AND SEXINESS  
IN NEW YORK

FROM THE AUTHOR OF  
HOW TO FAIL:  
THE SELF HURT GUIDE

AARON GOLDFARB

THE REFERENCES  
THE AMBIGUOUS WOMAN





T H E  
C H E A T  
S H E E T

S T O R I E S   A B O U T  
T H E   S E X E S ,   S E X ,  
A N D   S E X I N E S S  
I N   N E W   Y O R K

A A R O N   G O L D F A R B

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and plot are products of the author's  
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Any resemblance to actual persons,  
companies, or events is purely coincidental.

To Jessica, Amy, & Craig

If my appreciation was currency,  
you'd be fucking loaded.



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"Yesterday a blob  
of semen; tomorrow  
embalming fluid, ash."

**Marcus Aurelius,**  
Meditations



# The References

Upper West Side, SoHo, Midtown, East Village

Larry Clarence sat across the table from Shannon Doe. Doe wasn't really her last name, but Larry dealt with a lot of women whose last names he never learned, so, just like an autopsist at the morgue, when he didn't know a last name he'd throw a tag with "Doe" on their toe until he learned otherwise. Then again, Clarence, the surname he'd given Shannon Doe, wasn't his last name either.

Clarence and Doe sat in a dark romantic restaurant on the Upper West Side surrounded by other couples of a similar age. Larry was fifty-two, distinguished and classy looking, Shannon assumed he was a businessman with a closet full of nice suits in a nearby Columbus Avenue high-rise. He had inferred as much. Shannon was a forty-five-year-old divorcee who lived across town on the Upper East Side. They'd first met in the middle at Central Park's Boathouse, where Larry stood waiting for his grown daughter while Shannon read on a nearby bench. Larry mentioned that day that he had a father/daughter outing at least once a month.

"You really think you're done having kids?"

Older people on first dates are typically more forward than younger people, asking questions more probing than those asked by a generation still trying to find their way in the world.

Larry closed his eyes and smiled.

“Look at me, Shannon.”

“Look at you what? I’m sure you’re still...virile.”

Around them the rest of the pairings in the quiet restaurant were clearly long-time wedded couples out on a date night. Shoveling food into their mouths and not really speaking to each other, just excited to be away from the kids for a few hours.

“You’re doing pretty well on this first date here, Shannon,” Larry joked, “maybe you’ll get to find out about my...virility.”

Shannon giggled. It felt good to flirt. Men her age never flirted any more, they just expected a crass economic exchange. They ask out, I accept, they pay for food, I eat the food, I tell them about my life, they listen and act interested, if I wanted another meal I may have sex with them. But this felt good. Different.

“Perhaps. But not on a first date. Never on a first date.”

Shannon always said that line but who was she kidding, she would definitely sleep with Larry if he continued acting normal enough and didn’t turn into some psychopath like a lot of hot shot Manhattan businessmen out there.

“Fair enough.”

She admired his placid restraint. All men acted like they didn’t care when she mentioned she wouldn’t have sex with them any time soon, but she could always see the seething hiding behind their eyes. The number crunching in their head. “I paid \$500 for this prix fixe? I could have had a hooker threesome for a lot less and still watched the Knicks game.”

“So...you got any pics of your kids? Mike and Jessie was it?”

“What do I look like? Some proud papa so in awe of his two amazing kids’ abilities, achievements, and successes that I carry around five-hundred photos of them in my wallet?”

“I just...”

Larry laughed as he pulled out his phone.

“I keep those five-hundred pictures on my phone!”

Shannon laughed. She really liked Larry. He was smooth and cool, not sleazy in the least. How could a guy so in love with his children possibly be?

He started shuffling through the pictures.

“There’s Mike and Jessie when we went ice skating in Central Park last year, and there’s Mike winning an award at his job, Jessie with her sorority sisters...”

\*

Jessie sat on a stool across from Keith in a Soho wine bar.

“Is your brother looking forward to meeting me?”

“You know how it is. I’m sure Mike will feel a little awkward.”

“Mike’s not one of those big brothers who’s gonna want to kick my ass since I touch his sister?”

Jessie playfully punched Keith in the shoulder.

“I’ll kick your ass if you ever stop touching his sister.”

Keith smiled.

“Any how, baby, does my brother look like much of a tough guy?”

Jessie held up her phone and showed a picture of her and Mike in matching Christmas sweaters.

“No, I guess he doesn’t, babe.”

\*

Mike sat at a table with Katie, both sipping on margaritas.

“I must admit, Mike, I’m kinda nervous.”

“Don’t be, honey. My dad’s a big softy. Yeah, he’ll make a lame joke or two, but nothing worse than that. And, I bet you’ll be best friends with Jessie before the meal is through. All women love Jessie.”

Just then the waiter escorted Larry and Jessie to the table. Mike excitedly stood, shaking Larry’s hand and kissing Jessie on the cheek.

“Glad you could come, sis.”

Katie was elated to see Mike had such a nice-looking family. It’s hard being a single girl in such a tough city and stumbling upon a guy with a close-knit family made her feel at ease.

“It’s great to meet you two. Mike’s told me so much about the both of you, even though we’ve only been dating a few weeks.”

Larry smiled mischievously at Mike.

“Oh, he has, has he?”

“He has, sir.”

"I'm sure, Katie, he's neglected to mention I tell the funniest jokes this side of Jackie Mason. You ever hear the one about the bullfighter in the china shop?"

Katie instinctively reached down and squeezed Mike's hand. She could definitely see herself being part of this nice family one day.

\*

Mike was the first to arrive at the Russian Vodka Room in Midtown where they held their meetings on the first Saturday of every month. He took his preferred seat in the back corner of the dark bar and pulled a blank check from his wallet. He couldn't believe he was still having to write checks in the year 2010. When would everyday people be able to swipe their credit cards amongst each other? Writing checks was such a pain and this check was a real pain—some \$245 paid personally to Larry Darrow.

"Vodka neat, Sergei. I got some economic pain to numb."

Just then Larry Clarence Darrow entered the bar.

"First one here, eh Mikey? Give me a vodka neat, too, Sergei, and a plate of gravlax."

Larry sat down across from Mike just as he signed Mike Euclid to his check and slid it across the table to Larry.

"Nice work, Lar'. I appreciate it and you nailed it. But ordering two apps was kinda sleazy, you can't deny that."

"I was hungry!"

"Fair enough. But I'll get you back on Thursday night."

"Be my guest."



Just then several more entered the back room, pretty much all men in the 25-40 age range, but also Jessica “Jessie” Jones who sat down next to Mike, pounding fists with him in a mocking way.

“We are family, talkin’ bout my brotha and me...”

“What are you so happy about, Sister Sledge? You’re smiling like you just lost your virginity.”

“Yup, for about the 1000th time, Mikey. I’m just so absent-minded with it!”

Larry snorted and Mike smiled wryly.

Then, Terry Jordan, the founder and head of their little networking organization entered the back room, closing the door behind him.

“OK, hello, welcome everyone to this month’s meeting. Of course, I don’t need to check today’s minutes to know our first order of business is finishing up last month’s still-open topics.”

Mike grumbled under his breath, whispering to Jessie.

“Do you believe this tool? Has to follow Robert’s Rules of fucking Order for every meeting? I didn’t join this club to sit in student council meetings on Saturdays. I could be watching the Knicks.”

“Shhh...”

Jessie glared at Mike as Terry read from a legal pad.

“I wanted to start out with salutes for some particularly good work. Let’s give it up for Carney Davis who played his first son last week.”

Everyone politely applauded as Carney cockily waved.

“I also want to give it up for Mark Raines and Shelly Stein who

convinced their dates that they weren't just twins, but identical twins. Very impressive."

Heartier applause as both Mark and Shelly nodded, neither looking like the other in the least.

"And lastly, I have to salute our elder statesman Larry Darrow, who later tonight will be handling his first ever role as grandpa."

Even louder applause. Larry threw his hands up at everyone: "Oh, stop it."

\*

An hour later the meeting was over, their assignments for the week distributed, and some final orders of extracurricular business now being handled. In one corner of the room, Carney took pictures of Mark and Shelly with their arms around an older man, Dave Wendt. Tony Mulligan and Jeff Dunvy sat in a booth toasting beers as numerous pictures were snapped. And Terry patted some talcum powder into Larry's hair, making it look grayer and him older.

\*

Larry Darrow had been a white collar con man and had spent two decades bilking naive venture capitalists—oh, those exist—out of their money based on various made-up entrepreneurial ideas. That was why Larry could never give out his last name. If you Googled him, you would quickly and easily find a laundry list of charges which had found him in minimum security prison from the ages of 45-49. Honestly, Larry wasn't a bad guy. He was smart and ambitious but grew up in circumstances that never allowed him to take a normal path to career success. Oddly enough, "con man" is not a job for the lazy and for his entire adult life until he got busted, Larry was working non-stop. If he'd had the childhood and connections to have gone to college and gotten a legitimate job at age twenty-two, he would have worked far less hours and made

far more money. He had always been a smooth talker and two decades of his career made him even smoother, but he'd never had the time or know-how to meet any women and thus hadn't had much sex in his life and had never had a relationship. Leaving jail, he decided that was the most important thing in the world to him. But no classy New York lady was going to date an unemployed former felon with no career or family or friends. Luckily, Larry met Terry one day at the Central Park softball fields and Terry told him about the club.

\*

Jessie Jones had a tough childhood in Iowa after her parents died in a fluky car accident when she was four. She was the only one to survive the accident but was now forced to live in foster home after foster home for the rest of her childhood. She had no real family, her foster families only liked her because she made them around \$1500 extra a month in stipends, and she obviously had no friends and was frequently bullied in school because of her shoddy clothes and learning disabilities. By twelfth grade though she had become the classic movie stereotype and the poor, gawky girl had become a real beauty. She moved to New York on her eighteenth birthday to pursue a modeling career but her hips were a little too wide, her face a little too asymmetrical, and she hated the lifestyle—she had gone eighteen years without much food on her plate and wanted to finally change that. She earned money waitressing at a cruddy little bar on Chambers Street, had no friends, only drunken Wall Streeters trying to hit on her, and she was very lonely. Terry flirted with her one day as she walked through the South Street Seaport, thinking her a tourist, and, in a later conversation, though he'd claimed his club was purely male, he encouraged her to join.

\*

Mike Euclid had been raised by highly religious parents who shipped him off to an all-boys seminary boarding school at age

eight because they thought he had become a bad child (he was caught chewing gum in his second grade class). It was at the Ozarks Divinity School where Mike learned to talk and listen to people so well, good skills for a would-be priest to have. But as Mike got older, he became more self-aware and curious. He wasn't sure if religion was or was not for him, but just like the Amish rumspringa, he wanted to know what else was going on in the world. He wanted to actually have an interaction with someone he didn't have to call Sister. At age seventeen, he snuck off the school compound and with part of the mere \$500 he had saved from odd jobs got a Greyhound to New York City, the only American city he had really ever heard of and only in novels. There, he spent his next \$200 on Hell's Kitchen prostitutes. He didn't have sex with them, he didn't even really know what sex was yet, or how to have it, he was just so excited to talk to girls. Quite rapidly, Mike integrated into society and, within a year, no longer felt like a boy raised by Catholic wolves. Always fresh-faced and handsome, Mike was even able to start attracting women by his early twenties, tourists usually who were very interested in taking a "real New Yorker" back to their Times Square hotel room for a romp. But Mike was really a sweet, moral kid at heart, and what he really wanted, now that he was nearing thirty, was his first girlfriend. Girlfriends were hard to attract, though, when you had no family and friends. He was the first one to reply when Terry posted an intriguing ad on Craigslist back in 2007.

\*

When applying for a new job, the final few lines of one's resume are usually devoted to references—those certain people in your life who can tell a would-be employer that you're the right man for the job. The references in your actual life are a little different. A person can say things like that they are smart or funny or caring or loyal, but why would any one take another person's word at face value? That's why we all use shortcuts and get personal information from a person's references—their parents, siblings, friends. You know, that whole "company you keep" thing? These

references carry a ton of weight. It's much more believable when one's sister says he's a nice guy than when the guy says it himself. That's how Terry's little group got started.

If one, and only one, person believes something, they're either an iconoclast or crazy. Two people and you've got an idea worth listening too. Three and some traction is forming and soon, even if the original idea is a lie, if enough people respect it and believe it, then it might as well be true. How could Mike not be a nice guy if all these people from his life claimed he was?

Terry realized this. Terry was that weird breed that neither wanted a girlfriend nor a one-night stand. Oh, don't get me wrong, he had no problem with one-night stands, but they were a lot of work to consistently acquire. He'd much rather acquire committed companions and sexual partners for brief three, four, six month periods. This wasn't easy if you were a guy like Terry without any family or friends. After a few dates the girls would always get curious, if not downright creeped out—"There's no one else in your life? You have no friends?!"—and this would send up a massive red flag and soon the relationship would be over.

Keeping a girl in his life was easy for a few weeks when he was flying solo and lying up a storm, but at some point Terry would have to let the girl delve deeper into things. That's how Terry's little group, unofficially known as "The References," got started. A group of like-minded people who, for whatever reason, didn't have genuine references in their lives, and who needed these phony ones to help them in whatever they were trying to accomplish. Terry and Larry and Jessie and Mike were essentially players in a repertory company, playing whatever parts were needed that week.

\*

Every Saturday after their meetings, Mike and Jessie would go to some plastic paddy pub around the corner to drink beers, watch

sports, and try to pick up tourists. They never discussed anything of consequence. Knew really nothing about each other other than surface stuff. They were pretty much only warm body company. Neither Mike nor Jessie had a single friend in this world and one couldn't even really tack on "aside from each other" because they weren't really friends either. They simply didn't know how to be a friend to another person. If a conversation ever occurred between them, it was usually to discuss strategies of their lied lives.

"Abraham Lincoln said, 'No man has a good enough memory to be an effective liar,'" Mike noted.

"Tell me about it."

"That's why I started keeping track of all mine in this."

Mike removed a tiny Moleskine notebook from his jacket pocket and Jessie eagerly snatched it, quickly thumbing through. While Jessie snickered at some of the entries, Mike eyed a tourist en route to the ladies room.

"Lemme guess: Albuquerque?"

The tourist turned, confused.

"Are you from Albuquerque?"

"Flagstaff."

"Close enough. One state over."

"You sure know your geography." She curiously glanced at Jessie still thumbing through the Moleskine.

"Oh, don't worry about her—that's my sister."

The girl slightly nodded and tried to hide a grin as she broke off

and got back on task toward the ladies room. She would inevitably return to speak to Mike. Tourists were always impressed by Mike's ability to guess where they were from. It wasn't that hard. Every state was close to countless other states so if you just picked a semi-obscure city in the region you'd be "close enough." And, figuring out the region was just a matter of knowing accents and styles of that region. Like this tourist, who had a solid (real) tan, washed out blond hair, and wore the kind of pastels only assholes from the Four Corners region wear.

Jessie handed the Moleskine back to Mike.

"Not for me. I never worry about getting caught. I can wing it for four or five months before any man gets suspicious. By then, I'm over the relationship any way and onto something new. Though, I will admit I've been considering taking improv classes at UCB to help get me quicker on my feet."

"Typically, I'd agree with you but I think I'm actually starting to like Katie. I don't want it to end."

"It has to end. When you're attracting people to your life through lies, once the lies come to the surface, the relationship has to end."

Mike looked seriously at Jessie, in almost a pathetic way.

"What would be the harm in pretending we're siblings for the rest of time?"

\*

Mike and Katie arrived first to the East Village Thai place, then Jessie and Keith.

Katie had liked Jessie so much that she thought it would be fun to double-date with her.

If Mike and/or Jessie were normal people they would have probably thought it a tad weird to go on a romantic double-date with a sibling—even though they weren't really siblings—but instead, Mike was simply pissed that Jessie had played her part so well that Katie had wanted to actually be friends with her. Jessie hadn't tried to play her part any better than competently, but now she was kind of touched that Katie had specifically asked to see her again. Jessie had never had a friend, especially a female friend, and the possibility of Katie being her first excited her.

But she didn't tell Mike that.

Mike was still fuming that he would have to continue his lie and surely make it even more complex, just to continue dating the first girl he had ever thought he might truly love.

The initial dinner conversation actually focused more on the dynamic between Keith and Mike, who were finally meeting for the first time. Keith had joked that he had been nervous to meet Mike but now he seemed like a real cool guy—"Do you like college football?"—and Keith had loved that picture of the two siblings wearing geeky turtlenecks with snowmen and reindeer on them. Mike only marginally recalled posing for that particular picture with Jessie even though it had occurred just a month ago on a sweltering June day totally inappropriate for turtleneck sweaters.

While Keith yakked Mike's ear off about his thoughts on the wishbone making a comeback in the Big Ten—Mike actually didn't like college football—Katie and Jessie used their side of the table for girl talk which Mike struggled to monitor. He didn't like that. He especially didn't like how Katie and Jessie were instantly acting like the best of friends. And Mike'd had enough when, after one too many bottles of Singha, Katie had tried to make a funny joke after Jessie ordered a Happy Family platter, noting: "Just think, Jessie, we could all be a happy family one day!"



Keith chuckled and Jessie smiled and Mike exploded.

“No we couldn’t, Katie! You know why? Because Jessie and I aren’t even family! I barely know her! She’s nothing more than a fucking actor in my life!”

\*

After Mike had calmed down and carefully explained to a stunned Katie and Keith what was actually going on—Mike thinking this honesty would finally free him to have a happy life with Katie—and after Katie had stormed out, throwing the remaining Singha in Mike’s face, and Keith had called Jessie a “lying bitch” and left, too, and after the dust had settled and the kindly manager had formally asked Mike and Jessie to leave The Holy Elephant, and after Jessie had apologized to Mike, but not specifically, and Mike had apologized to Jessie, but not specifically, the two references went down the street to d.b.a. to have a pint and lick their wounds.

“I’m sorry for torpedoing your relationship with Keith.”

“You torpedoed your own, too. Any how, men are kind of pathetic, Keith will soon realize he’s lost out on a lot of future sex and come crawling back to me, regardless of the fucked up person he just found out I am.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I’m sorry for trying to make Katie my friend. I’ve never had a friend before.”

“I’m your friend, Jessie.”

“No, you’re not. You just admitted as much in the restaurant. You were right. You’re nothing more than my reference.”

“No, I’m your friend.”

"Then what's my middle name? What part of town do I live in? Where was I born?"

Mike grimaced.

"What's your middle name? What part of town do you live in? Where were you born, Jessie?"

Jessie smiled softly.

"Janice. Murray Hill. Iowa City."

"Jack. Hell's Kitchen. Memphis. Do you think we can be real friends? No longer brother and sister? No longer office mates? No longer cousins or whatever else we've been? No longer references?"

Jessie thought about it then kissed Mike on the cheek.

"Tell me, Mike, are your parents still alive? Do you have any brothers or sisters? What do you do for a living? Who are you, Mike? Tell me who you are."

# The Ambiguous Woman

Hell's Kitchen

She had given him her business card (Molly Stone/Weber Shandwick/Acct. Mgr.) and not just scrawled her number on a cocktail napkin, which seems less formal, tackier, less personal, but which he would have much preferred. He would have thought she really liked him if she had snatched his Blackberry from his hand and manually entered her number into his phone like he'd seen other girls do before, maybe added a personalized contact entry for herself, "Molly the cute girl at Gingerman," which would have actually filed itself under T as "The cute girl at Gingerman [comma] Molly," like the descriptor was her full surname, but still he would have liked that a lot better. He would have definitely called her if she'd done that. But, no, she had just said, "Well, gotta go meet my friends for dinner. Here's my card, shoot me an e-mail." Shoot her an e-mail? It was her business e-mail. Shoot? Shit.

He spent the whole weekend wondering whether he should do it. He spent far too much time wondering whether he should do it. He knew he was spending far too much time wondering whether he should do it. But he couldn't help himself. Why couldn't he just be cool and relaxed? Big deal, a girl gave

you her card. That's only step 1 of 100 with step, like, 5 being you winning her over and making her like you and maybe step 10 the first time you kiss, 22 the first time you have sex, "I love you" at 50, engagement 75, marriage at 100.

Yeah, it may have been step 1 but she was gorgeous. Tall, leggy, conservatively dressed yet still sexy. Just my type he thought. He also thought, every girl is my type until she's not.

Late Sunday night he decided to start drafting an e-mail to her. He wasn't sure he'd send it, but he wanted to be ready just in case. A part of him realized he wasn't merely writing for her. Oh no. She probably gave her business card out to a half a dozen douchebags every time she went drinking and thus probably received four or five e-mails every Monday morning. Like a job applicant, he'd have to stand out from the rest of the crowd. Yet he couldn't be too over the top. If he said anything too stupid she'd surely show it to her girlfriends and they'd all have a good laugh at his expense. "Another pathetic douchebag, another pathetic e-mail," one would say. They'd laugh. If he wrote something stupid enough, why, she'd probably even mass CC it around the office. He didn't know anyone at Weber but he had some friends in advertising and PR. At Edelman, Ogilvy, the like.

He didn't want to be a laughingstock. A viral office send-around joke up and down Madison Avenue. So he wrote a very bland, aloof, too-cool-for-school e-mail. He thought it would now stand out from the crowd of four or five other douchebag e-courtiers by how very bland it was. He made it so bland he wasn't even scared to hit SEND at 10:11 AM EST on Monday. He wanted it to fail. He totally forgot he had sent it by 10:12 AM EST. But by 1:34 PM EST he started thinking: Wait a sec...why hasn't she responded yet? I guess she truly did have no interest in me. Was just placating my awkward flirtations until she had to leave. Typical validation seeking girl. Loves to let guys shower her with flirts—make her feel good—when she has no interest in letting things advance any further. And if she has

to embarrass herself by asking the Weber office supplies guy to order her new business cards every few weeks, a much faster pace to blow through business cards than your typical acct. mgr., well, small price to pay.

At 2:24 PM EST she e-mailed him back. His heart skipped a beat, but not because he had an arrhythmia or something. He set the mood perfectly to read her reply. Closed all his other windows, took the earbuds out of his ears, swigged a big gulp of coffee to sharpen his senses so he could fully digest her e-mail. He hit OPEN MESSAGE.

Her reply was brief, briefer than his initial e-mail even. No apology for her slow response time, how inconsiderate, she had no respect for him. She said it was great to meet him but she had punctuated that particular sentence with a period, not an exclamation point. He thought: How great had she truly thought it was to meet me if she couldn't even feign exclamatory delight? He had thought it was great to meet her! But now he wished he hadn't. Period. He wasn't asking for, like, three exclamations: Great to meet you!!! That would have made her seem like a used car salesman, a late night ambulance chaser, a telemarketer, a phony. No one was that great to meet. I mean, maybe Shaq or George Clooney or Jay-Z, but not him. Not most people. But was he not even great (!) to meet?

Oh well. He decided he might as well go on the date anyway. She had proposed drinks for that Thursday and his Thursday was free. She was probably saving her weekend, Friday and/or Saturday night, for the guy she truly liked. The guy she truly thought she had a future with.

He arrived at 8:00 and 35 seconds. She had suggested 8:00 and in those situations it's no-win. Arrive early and she thinks you anxious; late and she thinks you a jerk. At least arriving on time guaranteed he'd be there before her. Would guarantee she'd have to find him, have to initiate the greeting. He saw her enter the bar out of the corner of his eye but faked like he hadn't, stared straight ahead, imagined her pace in locating

him. If she shook his hand he knew they had no future. A warm hug, perhaps they had one. He hoped she would present a cheek for him to kiss. That would really buoy his spirits.

He felt an arm on his shoulder. He turned. She smiled. No, more like a tiny perfunctory grin. "Hey!!! (!!!) Sorry I'm a little late. Would you mind watchin' this for a sec? Need to go to the ladies room." She swung her purse onto the barstool beside him. "No problem..." he muttered as she power walked to the restroom. He thought, she's going there to no doubt text a friend: "shorter than i recall. uglier too. oh well...free drinks!!!" "lol--ill call you in an hour to give u an out," her friend probably texted back, he figured.

Eventually she returned from the bathroom, threw her iPhone into her purse. "Whatcha' drinkin'?"

"A...uh...beer," he stammered out. Shit. Why had he ordered a beer? He felt like a buffoon now. Wasn't that the drink of buffoons? She probably thought him some buffoonish frat boy. Some cheap buffoonish frat boy what with the "\$3 Yuenglings" sign prominently displayed near the bar. How to assure her that he wasn't drinking Yuengling. His Sam Adams cost five bucks actually.

"Gin and tonic," she ordered, "Hendricks if ya' got it." She was so sophisticated, he thought. She didn't just order well liquor, didn't just say, "G & T, whatever ya' got, whatever shit's cheap." She actually knew a brand of gin. Nice gin, he bet. He wanted to try that gin, see what nice gin actually tasted like. But he didn't want to look like a copycat, some supplicating copycat if he ordered it his next round. Well, better the supplicating copycat than the cheap frat boy buffoon, he figured.

And, you know how things go from there. He'd ask her a question, she'd answer. She'd ask him a question, he'd answer. Like ping pong. A ping pong match he was clearly losing. He could never think of anything interesting to say, anything smart or funny or unique, so he just answered as best he could. "As best he could." Exactly what teachers told you to do on essay

tests in college in those little blue books. "If you don't know the answer completely, just answer as best you can." He always got bad scores on those kinds of tests.

He was certain he was boring her. Why else would she keep ordering drinks, fidgeting, keep changing the subject to sports and movies and restaurants? She seemed to like many of the same things and ones he did, which made him like her all the more. Too bad she didn't like him. Too bad he was boring her, forcing her to do anything to make the date more interesting.

She suggested they play pool. He liked pool. She probably liked that he would be bent over a table for several seconds every minute, thus unable to talk to her, to bore her some more. There were already some quarters on the table signifying that someone had "next." She found "next," some guy who had placed the quarters, some Wall Street dude much more handsome and confident than him, and suggested they play some two-on-two.

"Only if I can be your partner," the Wall Street dude flirted back. So cool. She looked back to him. "No. Not this time." This time. "This time he's my partner," she said as she pointed to him.

She was so sweet and nice. But she also probably thought she simply had a better chance of winning with him as her partner. She must have realized he was a bit of a yuppie hustler on the walk from bar to felt as he nervously tried to relate a story about being "pretty good" in college. He didn't want to sound too braggish, but she feigned being impressed. She was so sweet. He should have never mentioned he was in a frat. At least he also mentioned that he thought five dollars was a very reasonable price for the Sam Adams he was drinking.

He'd felt like such a drip, such a worthless, unaccomplished drip for the majority of the date, but he thought this was his chance to redeem himself. Were women impressed by men who were good at pool? Women were impressed by men that were good at anything, right? But pool? Might she

just think him a drunk who spent every night in bars? Yeah, probably. Thus, he decided to play at about 68% the best of his abilities. Not surprisingly, they still won.

After he sunk the eight ball, she jumped into his arms and gave him a big hug. It lasted a second longer than he expected, probably because he had grasped her too hard, not because she wanted to linger that second longer. She was so happy they had won. She was probably just drunk on that fancy gin. He asked her if she'd like to pay their tab and take a walk. He thought the brisk air might sober her up a bit. He didn't want her mad at him for getting her drunk. That would guarantee he'd never get a second date, though he was sure that was already inevitable.

So they walked and talked. She grabbed his hand. He was momentarily excited until she mentioned she was cold and started dramatically shivering. She was such a skinny thing. He was so fat. He put his arm around her to try and warm her up. It felt clinical to him but maybe if he was, like, a super-gentleman, then he could finally win her over. He would make his warming-up hug clinical so she thought him a super-gentleman and not some schmo just trying to cop a feel of her smooth back, her taut stomach.

They walked for a half-hour at least, in a seemingly random, chaotic pattern through streets and avenues until...

"Ha, look at that. We're on my street."

He then realized that pattern hadn't been random and chaotic at all. It had been engineered by her. She must have just wanted a man, any man would have done, to walk her back home safely. It was late at night and she did live on Avenue B. Whatever, he didn't mind being used a little bit, he was a gentleman at heart and he would have just felt terrible if she had had to walk home alone.

At her front door he said, "Well..." pronouncing the ellipses.

She said, "Well..." pronouncing her ellipses, too, then laughing. Surely laughing at the thought of how she would get rid of him now.



He laughed so she wouldn't think him a creep.

"Want to come upstairs for a nightcap?"

A "nightcap?" That's what his grandma called the one tiny glass of brandy she had before bedtime. She might as well have asked him if he wanted to come upstairs for a "lil' sleeping medicine"—also what his grandma called her brandy. It was now clear to him that she just wanted to be his platonic friend. His buddy. Oh well. That was fine. He'd allow it. Nothing wrong with having another pretty girl as your friend. Maybe she would even set him up with one of her friends that would actually like him in a romantic way. That would be nice.

Since it was now evident to him that she just wanted to be friends, he told his new pal what he'd have told any old pal. "Sure, I need to pee anyways."

In her bathroom he stared at himself in the mirror, trying to figure out what went wrong. Did he use too much hair gel? Should he have used none at all? That Wall Street hunk she had liked so much had floppy, tussled, un-gelled hair. Oh well, fuck her, she was clearly superficial. He'd just go back out, quickly suck down that so-called nightcap, leave, hail a cab, go home, masturbate to internet porn.

He exited the bathroom to find her standing there in shorts and a shear t-shirt (Kappa Beta Rush '00.) Boy, she's already dressed for bed, he thought. OK, I get it, she wants me to leave. I'm sticking around too long. She could have just asked, she didn't need to be passive aggressive, didn't need to embarrass him, he thought.

She leaned in and kissed him.

"Does that feel good?" he was soon saying. "Do you like that?" he was soon asking. The kissing had led to nudity which had led to bed which had led to sex. She was probably just drunk and horny, he figured. Any dick woulda done.

She was moaning—a bit—but she wasn't even looking him in the eyes, wasn't even kissing him, was probably thinking about the Wall Street dude, bemoaning the fact she never got his

e-mail address. Maybe she did when he wasn't looking? He tried to impress her with his sexual prowess, tried to make her come, tried to make her finally like him, but he failed. He came within three minutes, his pathetic penis wilting slowly into the condom she was surely glad was protecting her from him, vile him.

What a disaster of a date. He felt sick.

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After two days the elation began to fade away and after four days she began to get concerned and after a week she had given up. She'd had such an amazing first date with Ken. She'd thought she'd had such an amazing first date with Ken. Yet he never called her.

Why were men so hard to understand?

# The Boyfriend Trials

Morningside Heights

It seems the older I get, the pickier I get about my boyfriends.

Back when I was seventeen, I'd date a guy if he simply had a car to drive me around in. It didn't even matter if he was a pothead burnout with no greater ambition than getting to see Phish perform at Bonnaroo.

When I was twenty-one, I'd date a guy if he could simply make me laugh til I nearly peed my pants. It didn't even matter if he had dropped out of college to pursue a career in burrito construction.

When I was twenty-five, I'd date a guy if he simply had the ability to make me have an orgasm so powerful I nearly passed out. It didn't even matter if he was currently getting his law degree after having already gotten his MBA after having already gone to med school, now entering his second decade of perpetual higher education.

But now I'm thirty. And I've become incredibly picky. Look, I know that's atypical. I know most girls become less picky as they age. Take my friend Stacy for example. She is easily my most attractive friend. I would kill to look like her! Long, flowing blond hair she doesn't color. She doesn't even rubber band it into a ponytail when she works out like all of us other girls have to do to keep it out of our faces. Her hair, like, just knows to become windswept and sexily flow behind her, out of her way when she does

yoga and Pilates and spinning. She looks better after a two-hour workout than the rest of us do before it's begun. She's got these great eyes, too. They seem to change colors to suit whatever outfit she's wearing for the day. A fashion chameleon, you might say. She makes me so jealous! Or, at least she used to. Til she married Danny.

You oughta see this guy. Stacy totally broke all her rules to date him.

She'd always said she could never date a guy who went by a name that ended in -ie or -y. Joey, Bobby, Robbie, Ricky, Mickey, Danny. She just thought it sounded too childish. She wanted to date a man, not a little boy. Me? I kinda like guys with names that end in -ie or -y. Makes them seem hip and playful but, hey, I totally understand Stacy's point. I refuse to date any man whose name begins with a K. Kyle, Kevin, Keith, Kirby. I just hate that hard ka K sound and refuse to spend the next thirty to seventy years of my life saying, "I love you ka-\_\_\_\_." Yuck.

If I meet a nice man when I'm out, at a party or the bar or something, and he says, "Hi, I'm Kit," I ask him if that's a nickname or maybe he goes by another name and if he says, "No, it's just Kit," I have no choice but to say, "Sorry, Kit, you seem nice and all, but I just can't possibly date you. My ears are already bleeding from having heard your name pronounced just twice."

Stacy used to be the same way. That's why I was so stunned that day back in 2007 when I arrived late to happy hour to find her canoodling with some guy in a suit with his tie loosened after a kinda hard day's work. Stacy was so excited to introduce this new suited suitor to me.

"Bex, I want you to meet this charming gentleman who has been keeping me company while I waited for your lolly-gagging ass."

Stacy playfully elbowed the "charming gentleman" in the ribs as he extended his sweaty palm to me.

"Nice to meet you, Bex. I'm Danny."

I looked at Stacy confused. She smiled at me, then at Danny. I looked at Danny. I looked at his hand.

“Danny? Don’t you mean ‘Dan?’ Your name is Dan?”

“No. It’s Danny.”

“Daniel?”

“Well, Daniel is what it says on my license but I prefer to go by Danny. Makes me feel like a big kid.”

Two years later, just this July, they were married. Now my beautiful friend Stacy is married to a balding CPA with a most unfortunate soul patch and a closet full of Dockers who goes by the childish and totally unhip name of Danny.

I so can’t believe Stacy sold out her own convictions!

It’s like, I mean, what are they gonna name the son they’re gonna have in six months? “Danny-y?” Danny is already a child’s name, how can you make your child have a more childish name than that? Man, she frustrates me.

Or, what about our mutual friend Sarabeth? You should have seen her back when she was a sorority sister of ours at Miami. Back then she had a very strict “one strike and you’re out” policy with her beaus. Go a full twenty-four hour period without calling her? She’d dump you. Forget to say “I love you” before bidding her adieu? She’d lose your phone number. Get so drunk at a frat mixer that you couldn’t get a boner that night? You’d wake up from your stupor on the front porch with your Superman boxers stuffed into your mouth. She was one cold-blooded boyfriend assassin, I tell ya.

Back in the good ol’ days of course. Since 2005, she’s been with this guy Jake that is such a loser! He’s this graphic designer or something and he has a big scraggly beard that oozes all over his face and down his neck and pretty much into the collar of his shirt. It’s disgusting. I have no clue what Sarabeth sees in him!

“I mean, I can’t cite a specific rule of hers that he’s breaking, and I know all her rules, but he surely must be breaking some, right? I know for a fact she hates flannel.”

“Love is a powerful thing that transcends rationalities.”

“No, it’s not, Kris!”

My best friend Kris—he’s a he, not a she—and I were on the train headed north to Poughkeepsie for our friend Allie’s wedding to Jonathan.

“Only stupid people think love is irrational. Love is very rational, in fact. You desire things in a partner, you locate a partner with those things, you fall in love.”

“You callin’ me stupid, Bex?”

“Of course not. You’re the smartest best friend I could ever imagine having. You’re always helping me out. Who I am calling stupid are all our friends for pretending they’ve fallen in love with men that totally don’t have what they’re looking for.”

“Maybe they didn’t know what they were looking for?”

“Of course they did! They just decided to give up on looking. How desperate!”

Take Allie for example. A Southern girl from Oxford, Mississippi, Allie had always desired a quote-unquote perfect gentleman. The kind of guy that said “sir” and “ma’am,” who held open doors for her, even revolving ones, stood up at the dinner table when she returned from the ladies’ room, who wanted to support his wife financially and turn her into a homemaker to raise their many, many well-behaved children.

To me, at best, the kind of man Allie wanted sounded like a real Leave it to Beaver-type with all the sir-ing and ma’am-ing. At worst, like a disgusting misogynist. I would have never allowed a man to stifle me so much.

“That’s how we do it down South,” Allie would tell us. “Specific gender roles. It’s chivalrous.”

You aren’t down South any more, we’d tell her. This is Manhattan. Where could you possibly meet that kind of man up here? But Allie insisted she one day would and, you know, she was totally...wrong. She never met her dream man but instead met Jonathan, the complete antithesis of her desires. Jonathan was from a well-to-do Upper West Side family of theatrical producers and he himself was an experimental artist. He would have been a starving artist as his “showings” were nothing more than an excuse to gather his friends together to get loaded on hipster ironic boxed wine—maybe one friend would get so smashed they’d make an impetuous purchase of one of Jonathan’s beer cap dioramas—

but Jonathan's wealthy parents subsidized his lifestyle. Bought him art supplies, paid his rent in Soho, allowed him to take Allie to nice dinners at restaurants owned by celebrity chefs.

At these dinners, Jonathan never held open the doors, he never elegantly slid Allie's chair into the table after she sat, he never waited for Allie to receive her entree before he dug into his, and he called the servers "hey!" and "yo!" as opposed to "sir" and "ma'am."

He even encouraged Allie to continue working at her marketing agency as opposed to quitting to be his wife and the mother of their children. It just made no sense to me what Allie saw in Jonathan or why she had so subverted her romantic dreams to be with him.

"Has it ever occurred to you that sometimes we as humans don't know what we want?"

"Don't give me that, Kris. I always know what I want."

"I wouldn't be so certain of that."

"I am. What do I feel like eating tonight? Hmmm... something spicy yet creamy would be nice. How about some massaman curry in coconut milk from Charm Thai? What do I want to watch on TV? Something mindless and despicable would be divine. Hmmm...how about that new reality show The Oedipus Complex? In what position do I feel like getting...?"

"—all right, all right. I gotcha. Don't need to hear any more. But has it ever occurred to you, dear Bex, that maybe all your other friends aren't quite as decisive as you? Are more open-minded?"

"I think they are. But, I also think they are very scared."

"Scared?"

"Let's be honest, it's a numbers game and the older we get the less chance we have of finding love. That's purely statistical. At age seventeen, everyone we know is still unmarried. At age twenty-one, that might still be at 95%. By twenty-five, that might be down to 75%. And the percentage unmarried precipitously drops from then on."

"I'm in the same boat as you and I'm not scared."

"But you're not. You're nowhere close to my boat. A

thirty-year-old unmarried lady is in a canoe that just sprung a leak. A thirty-year-old unmarried man is on a gorgeous yacht with a vaguely double entendre name like..."

"Deep Float?"

"Exactly. It doesn't matter how awesome I am. The only men that would consider dating me are essentially those in my age range. Meanwhile, men can date anyone from their age range on down to girls merely one day older than the age of consent. Please consult your locality's statutes for the legalities."

We arrived at the Poughkeepsie train station and hailed what must have been the only cab in town, a late model sedan. We were running late—Kris claimed my indecisiveness as to what shoes to wear had caused us to miss a necessary, earlier train—and we were unable to make it to First Congregational to see the actual ceremony. Kris was a little peeved, but I was fine with that because organ music always makes me gag. About as much as it does to see my beautiful friends marry such losers. Any how, I always like to be the first to the reception so I can get properly lubricated up before all the other dressed-up dullards start clogging the bar area.

"This Kris, that Kris, is why our friends snapped these men up. They were scared. No woman wants to be thirty and single. A man who is thirty and single still has a life full of opportunity. Decades full. Make some money, get some power, some dashing salt 'n' pepper flecked hair, and all the little pop tarts still desire him. But me, the older I get, just makes me closer to being a part of some young buck's sexual checklist. 'Bro, I totally banged a chick last night who was born in the Seventies!'"

Kris couldn't help himself and started laughing. Eventually I joined him.

"I think I'm gonna need to get one of those sexual checklists myself. Eh 'bro?'"

"Yeah? What 'to-dos' would you put on it, champ?"

"Oh, I don't know," he cocked his right eyebrow at me. "Your best platonic friend of over a decade?"

"Stop it, Kris. That's gross. Then again, we are all that's



left. With Allie wed to Jonathan, we now have no single friends left. None whatsoever.”

“You sound sad.”

I shrugged.

“I think you’re scared too, Bex.”

“Maybe I am. How can I not be? But even scared, I refuse to break my rules in finding my man.”

“I suppose that’s admirable. But what are these rules you hold so steadfastly to?”

“No...”

“After twelve years of friendship, I think it’s time for you to finally share the specifics with me.”

“Oh, I couldn’t! You’d think me petty.”

“I dig your pettiness almost as much as your prettiness.”

I scanned the room. A 175 person wedding divided by 2 equals 87.5. Since there was at least two singles in Kris and I, there had to be one more single to make the numbers match. I wondered who that single could be. A man? A woman? Some bratty little child who would ruin the toast? I kept scanning. Couple after couple after couple after couple. Where was that single? And was he my destiny? It had to be my turn for happiness.

“I’ve known you long enough to know some of your rules, Bex. Simply by my sheer powers of observation. Let’s start with the physical. That’s obviously the easiest feature of a man to draw conclusions about.”

“I’m listening.” But I really wasn’t as I continued searching for this mystery single. It’s odd, the more you anticipate a person, the greater your imagination runs wild in crafting a fantasy. It’s like when you’re walking down the street headed toward a blind date. For some reason, the closer and closer you get to the restaurant, the more and more optimistic you get that you’re about to dine with some gorgeous, witty, and charming future love of your life who is going to sweep you off your feet. Then you get to La Pascalla and some fat dude in an untucked Polo shirt is drinking a pina colada with a bendy straw as he plays Tetris on his cell phone and the only

thing he's sweeping are the garlic breadcrumbs off his lap.

Likewise, the MIA single at this wedding was probably some thirty-five-year-old virgin cousin of Allie's with severe halitosis, scoliosis, and cirrhosis. Better to curb my enthusiasm before it ran too wild.

"...so the physical, head-to-toe. Hair-to-toe. Hair, you've always only dated men with brown locks. But not any kind of brown locks, never those nearly black, ebony brown locks. Nor those dirty blond/clean brown Ipswich pine locks. No, something more in the middle."

"Obviously." I guess Kris was going to make me go through the motions with him on this. I decided to play along.

"Officially...?"

"Officially, if you pulled out a Sherwin-Williams paint swatch, I'd be looking for something no lighter than Sedona brown and no darker than Grizzly Bear brown."

"Grizzly Bear? That's a real color?"

"Absolutely."

"How precise. So quickly scanning the room, even if every man here was single and available, you'd have just eliminated around 33% of your audience."

"Maybe even more. I have no tolerance for men that color their hair."

"We move down to the face. You like a man with a nice jawline and a strong chin while still having slightly cherubic cheeks. You detest intentional facial hair in all regards."

"From least to most hated: neatly trimmed, intentional scruff, goatee, fu-manchu, Van Dyke, unruly mountain man beard, muttonchops, mustache, soul patch. I can break down my least to most hated mustache styles further if you'd like: Dali, Rollie Fingers, handlebar, Walrus, Hitler..."

"OK, OK. No more is necessary. Any facial hair is a non-starter for you and even if a man is typically clean-shaven, by 5:01 PM the shadow better be gone."

"You know me so well."

"I am a clinical psychologist. I get paid the big bucks for my power of observance. And diagnosis."

I gotta admit, I was impressed with Kris so far. As the DJ implored us to take our seats, Kris and I found our name placards on a table tucked into a corner of the reception hall.

"But even with such amazing observation powers, I am still a guy and there's one thing we can never remember. Eye color."

I covered my eyes with my hands.

"Quick! What color are my eyes?!"

"Bex, every guy has had this done to him by a new girl he's dating. Just to test him. See if he's been engrossed with her and really paying attention. Funny, girls never cover there tits and ask, 'Quick! What do my boobs look like?' That's a pop quiz they'd always lose. You see, even if a guy has been paying intense attention to a woman, he simply doesn't care about her eye color. We just aren't evolutionary designed for such a thing."

"Is that your scientific opinion?"

"Untested."

"And is this how you usually answer women when they pop quiz you?"

"Of course not. Most women aren't as understanding as my sweet Bex. No, I just always guess hazel."

"That's a cheat guess. You're essentially guessing two of the only three major eye colors at once."

"Exactly. So long as her eyes aren't blue—and you'll recall usually if they are—you can justify your guess if you're wrong."

I removed my hands revealing my brown eyes. Kris stared deeply into them.

"See? Told you they were hazel. Nice little flecks of emerald green near the iris."

"Very clever. Hazel eyes are what I like in a man, too. Just like yours. Blue eyes creep me out. They make a person look like some albino alien freak. Especially paired with that Nordic blond hair. Blond haired, blue eyed guys look terrible in pictures with me."

"Now we've eliminated another dozen contestants. Onto height."

"I have to have a man between 5'10.5" and 6'2.5". Barefoot."

"Why so precise?"

"Well..."

I slyly smiled at Kris. We always said that we told each other "everything," but we didn't really. Kris never talked about who he was dating, or especially sleeping with, heck, he might as well have been a virgin for all I knew, and I never told him likewise.

"Come on. Tell me. You tell me everything. We tell each other everything."

I took a slug of champagne and lowered my voice so that none of the other guests now seated at our table could hear me.

"I'm fairly tall for a woman. 5'7.25". Without shoes on. I could say I need a man taller than me because, say, I don't like to enter bars and restaurants and other public venues arm-and-arm with some shrimp. Or, I could say I like the security of having a big, tall man with me at all times. But, the truth of the matter is, it's purely sexual. Isn't everything? A man who fits within those height parameters fits inside of me perfectly. In missionary our eyes, noses, and mouths meet flush. Spoon sex and we perfectly meld together like the same silverware company manufactured us. Doggy style, he's tall enough to reach. Standing shower intercourse and he doesn't have to do any hopping. That can be dangerous without a shower bar you know."

"That's a lot more than I thought I'd learn about you this weekend."

"Perhaps the bubbly's going to my noggin. My lips feel very loose right now."

"We'll get back to the sex later."

"Please, let's not."

"The more I think it about it, Bex, we can break your perfect man into four categories, disciplines, he needs to pass in order for you to accept him. From the quantitative to the qualitative. The measurable to the immeasurable."

"Those are...?"

“The sexual, the mental, the personal, and physical which we’re just now wrapping up.”

Kris scanned the room.

“Tell me more about myself.”

“Your boyfriend obviously needs to be in sublime shape.”

“No lighter than 165 pounds and no heavier than 210. He must be toned and somewhat muscular, too, especially in the arm and shoulders. A BMI of around 20.”

“You know that’s not the greatest scientific measure. None of the scientists I know respect it.”

“I know. But it’s still a measure of a man.”

Kris continued scanning the room, looking at all the men now seated at their respective tables.

“Bex, we’ve dealt with the easiest discipline only so far and the way I see it, you’ve eliminated every single man in this very large room. I see no man here that is:

- 5’10.5”-6’2.5”
- 165-195 pounds
- Sedona to Grizzly Bear brown hair color
- hazel eyes
- toned and muscular
- and with no facial hair.”

“Well...actually you fit the bill, Kris, come to think of it.”

Kris smiled at me, nodding.

“I’m afraid I’m technically, 5’10” flat, Bex.”

“Then, yes. No one fits the bill here today. Guess it wasn’t meant to be. For now.”

“Or possibly meant to be...forever. And that, Bex, is why so many of our, your friends relax their standards as they age.”

“Relax?!’ No, laying in a hammock with a mai tai is relaxing. My friends settled. Lowered their standards. Which I refuse to.”

Kris looked a little peeved with me, but maybe not. I could never read his mind like I could read the minds of so many others.

“This the singles’ table?”

We turned to see a gentleman in a sharp Hugo Boss suit standing over Kris and I. He was:

- 6'1.75"
- 181 pounds
- cocoa brown hair
- piercing hazel eyes
- clearly into fitness
- with a baby bottom-soft face that it appeared a straight razor had been used on mere minutes ago.

He was also...old.

"Yeah, I know what you two kids are sayin', 'This old flatulation is a swingin' single?' Well, I am as of this week. Just got divorced. Single again at age fifty-eight."

"You look great for your age. Is that rude to say? Doesn't he look great, Rebecca?" Kris raised his eyebrows at me.

I reached over and downed a flute of champagne like I was the Pied Piper of drunkenness.

I had an age rule, too: no more than two years younger than me and no older than 39 years and 364 days. I wasn't ready to date a man in his forties yet. Much less his fifties. Men always die first, and I didn't want to become some widow at age fifty-eight after my husband passed, now forced to sit at the singles' table again with two highly judgmental thirty-year-olds.

"You do look great, sir. I can't believe how vibrant a shade of brown your hair is."

"Yeah, well, I color it. Just for Men. In the men's hair care aisle."

I opened my eyes to find a cheese danish, my favorite, resting on my décolletage. I was still dressed for yesterday. Kris stood above me, fully dressed for today.

"The free continental breakfast ended at 10:30 so I thought I'd pick up stuff for the both of us while you slept off your hangover."

My head was throbbing. I felt like utter shit.

"I don't know how I got a hangover cause I don't ever remember getting drunk."

"Surely you remember getting drunk. It's being drunk I'm sure you can't recall. Come on, grab a shower. I want to catch the 12:07 back to the city."

As I tried to shower, fumbling with all the miniature products—one really needs larger items when hungover as dexterity is quite tough—I slowly pieced together my night. I thought perhaps all my friends were right, Kris too, maybe I did need to change my standards a bit. Not completely eliminate them like Allie did, but just "relax" them as Kris had discussed. Could I not find a lifetime of happiness with a man who was only 99.9% of what I wanted? Or even 99%? Or, good lord, 95%?! How low could I go in this limbo contest? Oh, God! My memory was returning.

I had figured I might as well give the fifty-eight-year-old divorcee a shot. The age difference was a big thing, a huge thing, but aside from that, he seemed to be, like, 82% my ideal boyfriend. Charming, well-educated, classy, witty, rich. Even Allie told me that we would be "perfect" for each other during that brief minute I got to chat with her. But that age difference was a biggie. I started drinking heavily and encouraged Gerald to do likewise. Alcohol makes everyone act the same age. Young. Childish. It's such a great equalizer in so many regards.

Bored with the other coupled guests, Gerald, Kris, and I posted up at the wet bar and started going cocktail for cocktail. Dry martinis, rye Manhattans, muddled Old Fashioneds. Kris and I quickly exhausted personal cocktail recommendations because people our age typically only drink beer or wine or the most basic blank & blank mixed drinks (rum & coke, vodka & soda, gin & tonic.) Gerald, twenty-eight years our senior, knew countless fun libations, though.

I tried to recall all their names as I applied conditioner to my scalp. We'd had a Rusty Nail (yuck), a Moscow Mule (quite nice), and Gerald's favorite: the Harvey Wallbanger. It called for

a liqueur named Galliano and the bartender had been forced to search under the bar for five good minutes before he eventually retrieved a dusty bottle. The drink was actually pretty good. An odd mix of citrus and medicinal flavors, it went down easy and coated my throat like Robitussin. Though, ironically enough, I noticed my throat was quite sore this morning.

After a few Wallbangers, Kris had talked me into dancing with him even though he'd always claimed to hate dancing for as long as I'd known him. Indeed, he wasn't that good, but, then again, a man's dancing abilities are not something I'd ever particularly cared about. Some women seem to think it's a solid measure of a man's ability in the sack, his rhythm you know, but I've never agreed. Most of the best lovers I've had couldn't even Hokey Pokey.

Eventually, I'd grown tired of dancing with Kris and Gerald had cut in just as...oh, God!

Had we really danced to Meatloaf on the crowded dance floor? Paradise by the Dashboard Lights?

"I was amazed you knew all the lyrics. That song is, like, eight minutes long, Bex."

"Yeah, well, let's just say I've been to a lot of weddings lately and that song's a bit of a standard."

I laid my head on Kris's shoulder as the train rumbled past West Point.

"You're the only person I can show my face to now!"

I buried my face into Kris's chest.

"Don't worry. You didn't embarrass yourself too much. Actually, people were kind of impressed. And I only noticed the photographer take four or five snaps of you two. One when you were hiking up your dress to show your thighs."

"Oh, geez."

"You were having fun. And Mr. Yockelson was having a blast."

"Who's Mr. Yockelson?"

"Gerry. Gerald. The man you were making out with last night in the lobby after having tore up the dance floor with him for



four hours.”

“We did not make out! Did we?”

“Afraid so.”

“We didn’t go any further did we?!”

“Now that, I’m pretty sure of. In fact, I ran into Mr. Yockelson this morning at the make-your-own-omelet bar in the lobby.”

“What’d he say?!”

“He asked me what 82% meant.”

“82%...?”

“Seems things were getting pretty hot and heavy in the lobby so he invited you back to his room. To which you replied, and I quote Mr. Yockelson who was quoting you: ‘I’m sorry, but you’re only 82%. If only you were my 100%.’”

I closed my eyes tightly, wanting the pain to go away.

“All I know is you plopped into bed with me around 2 AM.”

“I didn’t try anything with you, did I?!”

“God, don’t freak out. Would that be so bad? At least you didn’t tell me what percentage I am, though I have my suspicions. But no, you didn’t try anything with me. You just started babbling on about something you called The Boyfriend Trials.”

“I discussed The Boyfriend Trials?”

“You did. In fairly full detail.”

The Boyfriend Trials were something I had been formulating ever since I had turned twenty-nine. It was actually at my twenty-ninth birthday party at Modern Lounge, as I sat watching all those happy—but rule-breaking—couples fete yet another year I’d successfully lived on earth. I thought, Rebecca, you tried dating the “normal” way for the first twenty-nine years of your life—well, actually, for the last seventeen years as I wasn’t interested in boys until that day when the beautiful Dean Milbury with his curly locks strolled into geometry class, a transfer from a neighboring town—and where has it gotten you? Nowhere. Nowhere closer to finding “the one.” And, I wanted, needed, ached to find this so-called one before I turned thirty. De facto old maid

age. Spinster-dom. In that regard, I figured I needed to speed up the process. Quit looking for that proverbial needle in a haystack and, instead—let’s see, how to turn this aphorism on its head?—and instead get some sort of turbo-powered leaf blower to quickly blow away all the hay until all that was left on the barn floor was that solitary needle.

My leaf blower would be...The Boyfriend Trials. Though I’d never had the courage to unveil it until, I guess, last night.

“The Boyfriend Trials sounds a little too much like a reality show.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I never told you about it.”

“In fact, I’m not even sure that if you pitched that to your own network you could get it to pilot. It’s too derivative.”

“Have you seen the shows I’ve created in the last two years? Poker Face, Make My Mom a MILF, Elektra which is of course a blatant swipe of the far superior Oedipus Complex.”

“I love Oedipus Complex. I can’t believe Tommy and Cheryl won the challenge last week. I’m all about Brady and Emily.”

“Me, too!”

“So sleazy. But there is one valuable thing about these sleazy reality shows: they solve problems quickly. They make fat people skinny, drug addicts sober, washed-up celebrities into legitimate celebrities...”

“And find women boyfriends. Now what if you took this model of amassing a huge group of viable men and then whittled them down to the perfect man for me? Based on trials we design. Instead of sleazy, made-for-television, ‘good-TV’-moment-type things—a dinner date on a hot air balloon, a naked three-legged-race, a keg stand contest—we’d come up with legitimate stuff to find me the perfect boyfriend. Instead of the ‘talent pool’ being a bunch of thick-necked, tattooed, lunkhead guidos, looking to get their undeserved fifteen minutes, we’d start with real men, professionals, looking for love just like I am.”

“But how would we find these men? If we say we’re casting for a TV show then we’d only get the kind of fame whores you’re trying to avoid.”

Kris was into this and had become quite animated, his brilliant scientific mind racing to find a solution.

"We could scour internet dating sites and reappropriate the guys from that into The Boyfriend Trials?"

"No offense to the people that use those sites, but I just couldn't be happy with a man that desperate he had to turn to the internet."

"You're being a hypocrite. I use dating sites. They're great. How is utilizing the internet any different from organizing a massive boyfriend trial for yourself?"

"It's not. In fact, organizing a boyfriend trial is perhaps more pathetic. But what you guys never seem to understand is, women are innately hypocrites vis-a-vis men. If we weren't hypocrites, you wouldn't like us as much. You guys pay for dinners, hold open doors for us, protect us, do all the work between the sheets. And we never return those favors. Yet, you only desire us more. Believe me, men do not want the elimination of female hypocrisy to occur."

"Fair enough."

"Could we perhaps put an ad on Craigslist to attract my suitors?"

"Why would they show up? What's in it for them? The kind of man you want would not be so pathetic to show up for a cattle call."

"Moo."

"Maybe we could offer something? A prize?"

"No. The kind of man I want likewise wouldn't be the kind of man that desperate for a freebie. I mean, do you see those losers that line the streets those few times a year to wait for hours just to get a free cone from Ben & Jerry's?"

"Medical testing? Blood donation? Cancer research?"

"Now were getting somewhere. But we have to be careful. If we make it too related to medical testing we'll just attract weirdos into free experimental health care. Make it too much about blood donation and we get too many namby pamby bleeding hearts that want to 'do good' for the world. Yuck."

“But at least we’ll know they’re disease free.”

“That should go without saying.”

“Hmmm...how to attract attractive men and put them on trial...”

“Without them knowing they are on trial...?”

We sat silently thinking as our train headed under Manhattan Island and back toward Grand Central.

“I guess my biggest problem in figuring out how to find these men is that I just can’t justify how, even if we whittle down a ton of ‘applicants,’ ahem, and actually found the perfect boyfriend for you, how will he react? We can’t just say, ‘Congratulations, Kris, you prevailed over all others in our imaginary trials and—tada!—now you have to be Bex’s boyfriend!’”

“That’s where you’re wrong my friend.”

“Doesn’t the man get any say in this?”

“The man won’t want any say in this. Say doesn’t matter to men. All men want is to have the hottest woman they can attract. They won’t care about how they got that woman. Me.”

“Are you sure you are gonna be the hottest woman the victor of The Boyfriend Trials can attract?”

“I’m certain I’ll be close enough.”

I smiled at Kris and he laughed and smiled back.

“I’m certain of it, too. Then what I will do is put an ad in this week’s med school newsletter and a few other places looking for single men for a trial. I’ll note that it’s a trial analyzing how attraction works. I’ll infer that actual, legitimate sexual intercourse will be part of the trial. Even the coolest, most confident, educated, well-to-do, and mature man cannot ignore an offer of no-strings-attached sex.”

“No-strings-attached but plenty of those wire monitory thingies you nerds put on test subjects, right?”

We arrived back at Grand Central and took the escalator up to 42nd Street.

“Walk me back to Hell’s Kitchen?”

“I’d love to.”

We dawdled across the hellish 42nd Street area, tourists

galore, vendors of knock-off purses, shitty electronics shops, the stench of burned halal street meat.

"I can begin the preliminary trials next Monday. I'll secretly use my lab after dark. Man, I'll get in trouble if the administrators find out, but anything for you, babe."

"You're sweet. Sweetness is one of my key desires in a man."

"I'll make a note on that."

"Where should I meet you tomorrow?"

"Meet me?"

"To start helping with the trials."

"Oh, no. You are 100% not involved. This is what we call blind testing, baby. Double blind, in fact, as neither you nor the man will know what you're in for."

"If you're doing it by yourself, how will you know what I want?"

"I actually won't be doing it myself. I'll have my lab assistant, Stephanie, help"

"Stephanie, huh? That's the first time I've heard of her, Kristopher. Naughty, naughty. Are you boning said lab assistant Stephanie?"

I was onto Kris.

"No, I am not."

"Come on. Be honest. Tell your best friend, Bex. We tell each other everything, remember?"

"I swear I'm not!"

"OK, be shy. But I just hope you haven't broken any of your own rules for her."

"I don't have rules like you crazy ladies."

"Yes, you do. We all do. I know she has to be a sports fan. I know she can't be a vegetarian. I know she must keep her pubis shorn like an Augusta putting green."

"Stop it."

"I could go on. But I'll stop."

"Thank you. Just as we reach your walk-up. Any preference for the kind of place your man lives in, now that you mention it?"

“Why, yes, of course. If he’s willing to move, then anywhere is fine. If not, then he’ll need to live—for now—between 59th and Canal, the Upper West Side no higher than 79th, and I’ll even accept downtown Brooklyn near a train line.”

“Noted. So, I’ll start tomorrow night?”

I still wasn’t sure. I didn’t like not being in control of my own destiny.

“I’ll text you in the morning if I’m really ready to go through with this.” I lightly kissed Kris on his scruffy cheek. “But, until then, as Michael Lee Adley once said...”

“Who’s Michael Lee Adley?”

“Meatloaf. As Meatloaf once said, ‘Lemme sleep on it, baby, baby, lemme sleep on it..’”

“You’ll give me your answer in the morning?”

## TRIAL #1

Dear Bex, today was a great success! My methodology for finding you the 100% perfect boyfriend begins with the premise that there are probably dozens, if not hundreds, of men that fit this bill on the globe. On this planet of 6.8 billion. But, of course that number isn’t correct, because even if a mate is an exact match for you, yet she is a woman, you would have no choice but to turn her down. We aren’t experimenting in that way. That gets us to a mere 3.4 billion. Next, you noted how you only wanted English language speakers. Prudent, I’d say. You wouldn’t want to have to hire a translator at all times just to have a love life. And you’ve often noted you’re quite talkative in bed which would turn each act of romance into an unwitting threesome. You likewise noted you’d prefer non-accented English speakers. A tad xenophobic maybe, but I’m sure you’d just note that you don’t quite have an ear for understanding brogues and whatnot. A valid enough point. That pretty much leaves us with Americans from major cities that know how to speak appropriately. I thus had to eliminate all Southerners with their twanginess, New England chowdah-heads,

Minnesooooooooootans, surfer dudes from the West Coast, and the like. On the other hand, I added Canadians so long as they don't predominantly speak French and can pronounce "about" correctly. We are a nation of slack-jawed muddle mouths, what can I say?

My admittedly rudimentary arithmetic puts me down to, let's say, 80 million now. Lop off anyone that's not in the twenty-eight to thirty-nine age range and we're at 11.2 million. Men with brown hair are 60% of the population, men with hazel eyes are 9%, men in the 5'10.5"-6'2.5" height range are around 75%, the 165-195 pound weight range, similar. This gets us down to a back of the envelope guesstimation of 340,000 on planet Earth we can draw from. And we don't even know which of those 340,000 are available!

Obviously, I can't put all those 340,000 on trial. Would take the rest of both our lives. Talk about Sisyphean! You wouldn't have your perfect mate until you were in your nineties! Now, from conducting countless lab tests, we scientists know a very basic formula for how many subjects we need to create an exact microcosm for a larger population.

You take the value of the population you're studying: 340K

You take how large of margin of error you're willing to accept in your findings. In your case, I decided to go with a +/-2.5% margin of error which is quite small.

Within those parameters, I calculated I needed to begin with 272 men to be 90% confident that I would find A, if not THE, 100% perfect man for you. That may seem like a large set of men to begin with—and, indeed, we typically only use a few dozen people for most experimentation—but when I put this advertisement...

ATTRACTIVE male volunteers needed for clinical study of what the female sex drive most responds to. Must be between 5'10.5"-

6'2.5", 165-195 pounds, brown hair, hazel-eyes, steadily employed earning over \$150K per year with at least \$500K liquid, to qualify for the "benefits."

...in the UWS Weekly Journal, the University Bulletin, and the Columbia Healthpoints e-newsletter, I had those 272 men by the end of the week. Piece of cake. Yes, perhaps a little too skewed toward optimistic horndogs but I can tell you firsthand that even the men you don't think are horndogs are very much horndogs. Let's assume no experimental bias there. Likewise, everyone's a narcissist nowadays, so again, no experimental bias. It's unfortunate. But it's what helped us easily fill this trial's base.

Trial #1 was to be a purely mental test. Even with your enormous list of requirements—I think when all was said and done, Bex, I counted well over 1300 separate desires—you were actually fairly ambiguous in your mental desires. You did note you wanted a man in the 99th percentile of IQ. A man who scored in the 99th percentile on his SATs. A man who had been accepted to a top 50 American university (or a top 100 world uni) but you noted he need not have necessarily matriculated so long as he left school early to pursue a worthwhile and/or lucrative dream. You noted that he should have a vocabulary of a least 20,000 words which is bordering on Shakespearian. And, you noted, that, while it was not a requirement, he should receive a few bonus points if he can fluently speak a foreign language. Especially if it's a foreign language of a cuisine you particularly enjoy (say Thai, Italian, or Turkish). All this despite the fact that you got no further in your own foreign language studies than tenth grade French. *Ce la vie.*

I herded these 272 men into our largest experiment lab like they were sheep going to slaughter. I saw a lot of nervousness in their faces. Anxiety about the unknown. I had Stephanie hand each man a blank sheet of paper with only a number from 1 to 272 in the top right corner. From now on, this was to be each man's official



designation. Stephanie and I didn't want you to falsely fall for a man simply because he had an enticing or mysterious or erotic-sounding name. You know, something like Vince Van de Meer or Chip Champion or Roberto Bernadino. Thus, from now on, I will call each potential mate of yours "Man #1" or "Man #35" or "Man #182," etc. I think this bland and passive naming will work best for our clinical purposes, assuming you don't have any sort of numerical fetish. Assuming you're not tickled at the sight of looping sixes, that you aren't turned on by sharp sevens, or seriffed ones. You aren't, Bex? Very good.

Now, for the mental test, I had a few options. I could have given them a straight Stanford-Binet IQ exam and eliminated any man who scored under 145. But I didn't like that. IQ tests are easy to game if you know the tricks. I could have publicly requested each man's SAT score. But these men took that test anywhere from thirteen to twenty-two years ago. I'm not sure how we could possibly respect the results any more. As for a man's vocabulary, it's virtually impossible to quickly analyze that. These men weren't trying to get on Jeopardy!, or even Who Wants to Be a Millionaire. They didn't need to sit through a rigorous test of trivial minutiae, they were simply trying to be your future boyfriend. And your perfect boyfriend should be smart. Smart enough to keep up with you, Bex, if not exceed you with his awesome mental prowess.

So, we gave these 272 men a simple one-question essay test that we thought a flawless measure of said man's intelligence:

Eighty-five miles outside of Paris, there is a tiny French town called Cangers. In this town are only two barbers, with shops directly across the street from each other. La Flamme is run by Michel Devoux, a handsome man who never has a single hair out of place on his perfect head of neatly trimmed hair. Likewise, his shop is also impeccably neat, with nothing out of place. The floor is swept clean of loose hairs mere seconds after they hit the floor, the chairs

are always spotless, and his tools are always perfectly tucked away in their special little spots. Across the streets from La Flamme is Guy Valois's run by, yes, Guy Valois. Guy is a despicably ugly man, almost hard to look at in his heinousness. His face is more asymmetrical than a Cubist Picasso work and his hair is more askew than the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a bunch of messy miscut locks. His barber shop is likewise a mess, hair piles so high it's like wading through a rice paddy, tools strewn everywhere, even an alley cat that wanders around on the countertops. No one in town speaks English and you need a haircut really badly—what barber do you go to? And why?

"That's the entirety of your mental aptitude test?!"

"Sure is. You sound...displeased."

"This is serious stuff. This is my life! My future! And that's all the effort you put into the test? What, were you too busy messing around with Stephanie on one of your lab tables?"

"No, I told you, we don't date. And we actually put a lot of effort into this one question."

"But it's so easy."

"Is it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then what's the answer?"

"It's obvious, isn't it? You'd go to the nice clean barber with the nice neat shop. Why would you possibly go to the filthy place?"

"Oh, really?"

"Is that wrong?"

"There technically isn't a right or wrong. But, yes, you are wrong."

"How so?"

"I don't know about you, but I personally choose a barber shop based on one thing: who will cut my hair the best. And in a town of only two hair cutters, the one with the best haircut most likely had his hair cut by the other barber. The ugly, disheveled, messy one. Who likewise procured his terrible haircut from the neat barber who you too have just chosen to cut your beautiful blond locks."

I was stumped. Kris had me there. I could simply mutter out an: “Oh.”

“But it wasn’t as simple as picking the messy barber to pass my test. That would have simply been a 50/50 proposition and gotten us nowhere. I wanted to see each man’s logical reasoning skills, reading comprehension skills, writing, and vocabulary.”

Kris pulled a yellow legal pad from his bag.

“We had a lot of interesting answers:

“Man #7 noted, ‘Since I speak fluent French, I would simply ask around town.’ Hard to dispute the logic and, though he subverted the spirit of my exercise, the fact that he fluently speaks a foreign tongue gave him enough Bex bonus points to advance to the next round.”

“But I don’t like French food. Too rich.”

“If you don’t like French food then you don’t like food. Man #63 responded: ‘Which barber is cheaper? I would just go to that one.’ A bargain shopper or just a cheapskate? Hard to say, but he did have a luxurious head of hair. He looked like an anchorman before the mousse has been applied. But I couldn’t advance him to the next round.”

“He was cute, though...?”

“Man #171 wrote: ‘I would travel to Paris. More options and you can never be too serious about getting a good cut.’

“Again, hard to argue with that logic and I did notice a Princeton class ring on his finger so he was clearly a smart Oreo.”

“I almost went to Princeton, you know.”

“But I couldn’t advance him to Trial #2.”

“He sounded really cool, though.”

“When all was said and done, I had found a mere ninety-two men who had satisfactorily passed my test.”

“Wow. One little question eliminated that many men?”

“That many great men. I saw some real winners leaving the lab. Like man #228. Oh heck, might as well just say his name now since he’s not for you—Sherlock Levy. Do you believe that name? I guess his parents were real literary types. And he was,

too, though he wasn't no pencil-necked geek. Oh, no. He played quarterback for Johns Hopkins. Real sharp dude. Handsome as sin. But he missed the question, so I had to eliminate him."

"What a cool name."

"I thought so, too."

"Now we're down to ninety-two men, what's next?"

"Sorry, I went off on a tangent with my dreamboat Sherlock discussion. We're actually at sixty-four men now."

"Huh?"

"Stephanie decided to take some initiative and compare each man's college he went to with the latest U.S. News & World Report top fifty college and university rankings. Smart girl and a real stickler for the rules. That's a great asset in a laboratory environment where even the slightest error can completely ruin a massive experiment."

"Stephanie sounds like a real ass."

"What?"

"Asset. Assistant."

"Right you are. Man, Bex, you should have seen some of the twenty-eight men we eliminated because their college didn't cut muster. Wait, is it 'cut muster' or 'cut mustard?' Both kinda don't make sense to me, yet both kinda do make sense. Damn, I should have taken some English courses in college instead of all that science."

"It's 'mustard.' Like French's."

"I prefer Gulden's. Something spicier that let's you know it's there. Though not Grey Poupon. I hate having to stick a knife into a jar every time I want to add a condiment to my dog. Squeeze top bottles are where it's at."

"Yes, yes. So tell me about some of the, what was it, twenty-eight men you had to eliminate?"

"Eh, what's it matter? Gone and already forgotten. Though I do remember this one chap. Man #14, I believe. Built like a Greek god. And not a sucky Greek god like Chronos or Aether or something. A badass Greek god like Apollo or Atlas. Though Atlas

was technically a Titan. Hey, you think Dionysus had a beer belly?”

“So this guy...?”

“Oozing with charisma like pus out of a pustule. He was cracking us all up with this story about the last time he had to dogsit for his brother-in-law. Ha! This guy could be a huge movie star if he felt like it. But he’s too busy being an architect. He designed that new skyscraper by the High Line.”

“I love that! #14 designed that?! Wow. So, what’s wrong with him?”

“Unfortunately, he went to Cooper Union. Top notch architecture program, but not in the U.S. News & World Report top fifty. Your rules. And I ain’t breakin’ ‘em.”

## **TRIAL #2**

Now Trial #1 was fairly easy, Bex, but Trial #2 was infinitely more difficult. How to quantitatively test a man’s personality?! Has such a thing ever been attempted before? I did some research on Lexis Nexis to see if there was any test we could reappropriate.

The first ever attempt at personality testing was done in 1919. The Woodworth Personal Data Sheet was created for the U.S. Army to figure out which new recruits might be most susceptible to shell shock. A potentially nice thing to know before getting into a steamy relationship, but, alas, Stephanie and I decided to let you be the one to worry about any men you might cause to have PTSD.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator was another fascinating attempt, based on Carl Jung’s work, in fact, to try to find out how people perceive the world and make decisions. Created by a mother and daughter team in the 1940s, this was originally used as a way to help women figure out work they might be able to do while the men were away during World War II. Perhaps if your ideal male archetype was Rosie the Riveter we would have used this one, but alas.

Of course, there's always the Rorschach test, but every male always secretly thinks the ink blots look like labia and thus we gain no new insight.

Scientists at Cambridge recently developed the Empathizing-Systemizing Test which theorizes the personality differences between the male and female brain. At first, this seemed potentially helpful, but, after a cursory glance, it seems like their conclusion was simply that men care a lot more about their fantasy football team. Rimshot!

So, what did that leave me with? I could have issued the Sixteen Personality Factors Questionnaire, a famous personality exam again devised back in the 1940s, that decade of personality obsession. You know, one of those written personality tests with questions like:

### **HOW FUNNY ARE YOU?**

(Not funny)      **1**      **2**      **3**      **4**      **5**      (Pants Pissingly)

But how to trust their answers? Every man—no, every person—believes they are more this and more that than they truly are. Few are willing to admit that they are mediocre at something. Men are a very cocky species.

Stephanie suggested she could privately interview each of the sixty-four men, carefully taking notes on their prowess in a variety of personality traits that you specifically desire. That didn't work for me though. I was concerned that each man would be trying too hard to impress my pretty assistant, making it hard for me to get a read on anything. In fact, they might even fall for her!

Running out of solutions, and bored, Stephanie started killing some time by reading a CityGirl magazine left in our waiting room

by some undergrad. With amazing kismet, this month's cover story was "101 Questions to Know if Your Man is Babe-o-licious." We were amused with such queries as—"Does he manscape his nether regions?" and "Does he use bar soap or a loofa?"—but we ultimately decided this periodical was not that scientifically valid, despite the fact that the test's writer claimed a prestigious PhD in Date-ology from Case Western (not a top 50 university, if you're interested).

Then, we saw something truly helpful in the magazine. Under a section entitled "17 Awesome Fifth Dates!!!," after, if I recall, having public sex at the zoo and renting a limo and reliving your prom all over again, it noted that sexual scavenger hunts could be fun. I don't know if this was an Archimedes type moment or maybe we were just high on lab fumes, but we both said "Eureka!"

Thus, we created what we called a Personality Display Scavenger Hunt, though the men truly wouldn't be "hunting" for anything per se, just displaying traits they hopefully already had. We stayed up all night and then the next day gave each man a scavenger list. The list included such things as:

1. Make your colleague laugh.
2. Display knowledge of fine food and drink.
3. Relate an anecdote your colleague tells to your favorite hobby.
4. Detail how your sports fanaticism informs your business life.
5. Display an artsy/creative side without explicitly saying anything.

We gave each of the sixty-four men this sheet of paper and told them they would be meeting with another man in what was to be a mock business meeting between two colleagues who had never met before. Sixty-four men, thirty-two pairings. We told each man that during what was to be a ten minutes long, informal meet-and-great conversation, he was to try to accomplish as many scavenger tasks as possible in as subtle of manner as possible. We assured each man that his "colleague" was not in on the scavenger hunt

and would simply be trying to have a pleasant and informative conversation. We noted that a man's colleague should never suspect for even a second that anything is askew or set up with the conversation, lest the test be completely voided and the man eliminated from consideration.

Observing these thirty-two ten minute long conversations, we quickly learned one thing: very few of these men have the personalities you so desired. Most of the men struggled mightily to subtly inject, say, humor or wit or a discussion of current events into their conversations without doing so in a heavy-handed manner. Even though they knew the personalities they had to display, if they lacked these specific personalities, they were frozen, unable to display them.

Of the sixty-four men, only thirty were able to even accomplish ten of the twenty tasks, and a mere thirteen accomplished nineteen or twenty of them. Stephanie and I were forced to disqualify two men who were simply going down the list and trying to tick off one task after the other. We disqualified another man who consider punning to be humorous.

"Hmmm, Kris...interesting methodology. But, do you really think this will help find what I'm looking for? It seems more like a gimmick."

"Absolutely! I can wholeheartedly assure you that these remaining eleven men have every personality trait you desire. And in abundance! They are funny and charismatic, they are well-read and knowledgeable on a wide range of topics. They have a large variety of talents and obsessions. These men are raconteurs of the highest order."

"Yeah, that's great, but can they...like, listen?"

"Listen?"

"Yeah. It doesn't seem like this test really took into account whether these men can listen. I want a man



who can listen to me. Who cares to listen to me. I talk a lot, you know.”

“I listened to you, didn’t I? If I hadn’t listened, then I wouldn’t have known these twenty personality traits you demanded your next boyfriend have.”

“Yeah, but...”

“You’re saying ‘yeah’ a lot.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

### TRIAL #3

Bex, this was the trial I was least looking forward to. Firstly, how to find the man most sexually compatible for you? Without that man ever meeting you? Much less ever having any sort of intimacy with you?! I was perplexed. Bex, you say you’re a very sexual woman, not that I would know anything about that. Unfortunately! About being a sexual woman, that is. I kid. About you being very sexual as, of course, we know that I have never done anything more sexual with you than, perhaps, a kiss on the cheek. I gotta say, it was odd listening to you, my best friend, describe to me your sexual desires and preferences, but it was an absolute necessity. Oh, and whoa, did you break it down in detail for me. Intimate details of the details you desire intimately. You could seriously be a romance novelist. Have you ever considered that? Nuts to reality TV, writing supermarket romance novels for fat and lonely housewives could easily be your next career. Heck, you’d no doubt be the Tom Clancy of the industry.

I started thinking. Could I just have these men describe how they would make love to a woman? To you, technically? Nah. That simply wouldn’t work. Any researcher worth a damn quickly learns you can’t trust human beings to describe how talented they

are at any given tasks. Surely you've heard the term "cognitive dissonance?" Human beings unable to recognize their actual abilities? Unable to rationalize why and how they do certain things? Your own field is a cottage industry of this practice! There was a great paper on this subject a while back. Unskilled and Unaware it was called. This paper basically determined that people simply don't understand how bad most of them are at most everything. Even more interesting, the worse someone is at something, the worse they are at critiquing their own performance at such a thing. And everyone thinks they are good at sex. But, by definition, 50% of people have to be below average. They, of course, wouldn't know they are below average. Whereas, one can, or should, be able to see they suck at cooking after having a well cooked meal from someone else. Or see they suck at golf after watching Tiger Woods rip a three-wood. We never get to see other people have sex aside from those people we have sex with and, you know, porn stars. I think you've mentioned to me countless times, Bex, how bad so many men are at sex. No, I wasn't calling you a slut! That's not what I was inferring when I said "so many!" It always baffled my mind. How could a human be bad at something they're innately built to do? It would be like being bad at walking. Or putting food in your mouth. Or talking. Then again, if you've ever been to a mall food court in the midwest you might argue that many humans are indeed bad at those aforementioned things. And, after having watched eleven men show off their sexual prowess, I can now confirm: most men must be bad at sex, too.

So here's what I did. I needed some female partner for these men to show off their chops on. No, Stephanie refused. Come on, Bex, quit joking. No, that's not why. I would have allowed it. But we eventually both agreed it went beyond her laboratory duties, too. Prostitutes were out of the question, as well. Seemed a bit unethical. We could have had the men bring in a woman they knew to sleep with, but that would create an experimental bias if it was a woman they were already comfortable with. Plus, I figured you

wouldn't want to be with a man who had had sex in a laboratory setting for the "sake of science."

Thus, we had to brainstorm and I believe we came up with a fairly satisfying solution. You mentioned that you like a man that takes control in the bedroom. That knows what to do. You mentioned liking to be "manhandled"—your words—and thrown around like a "rag doll." Well, we didn't have these men get frisky with rag dolls, but we did have them get frisky with a specially designed latex sex doll. Can you believe we got the university to pay for that?! Oh, man, we're going to have to totally find a legit reason we expensed \$2200 on that.

The men came into the lab, and many of them were a little nervous, despite the modest tranquilizers we had given them to lower inhibition. Even so, having sex can be unnerving in so many ways! Nakedness to a partner is akin to revealing yourself to a scientist like myself. Thus, any man that was too nervous had to be immediately eliminated. And two of them were. A little nervousness is fine of course. The great basketball legend Bill Russell literally vomited before every single game of his storied NBA basketball career. A little nervousness shows that we are alive. That we still care, that we have emotion, and that we aren't unfeeling psychopaths.

After eliminating the nervous two, Stephanie and I—behind a two-way mirror—individually watched the remaining nine demonstrate how they make love. From entering the bedroom to foreplay, undressing, kissing, applying a prophylactic, oral sex, massage, vaginal intercourse, extracurriculars, finishing, and even their post-coital behavior. Oh, it was certainly weird at first, for both us testers and our lab rats, but eventually we got probably the most thorough examination of a man's sexual acumen before said man had ever got to perform for his future mate.

Man #61 had to be eliminated for the less than supple way he digitally stimulated the clitoris. He was working it like a Golden Tee rollerball at the local pub. He had the meaty paws of an oafish construction worker and there's no way he would ever bring you to orgasm.

Man #68 was skipped when he lost his erection for a third time, his condom fell off, and then he started yelling at his dick like it was some boxer who the ring judge was about to count out. "Get up, goddammit, get up!...8...9...10! \*DING!\* KO!"

Man #99 we whacked after he threw the doll into the headboard so powerfully that the noggin was momentarily dislodged from the body. Methinks that might have been a little too rough for you. He had an uncircumcised penis any how. Gross.

Man #148 was eliminated after asking if Man #214 could join him.

Man #214 was eliminated for...well, let's just say the Kama Sutra would be a single page if he had written it.

And Man #215 we sent packing when he fell asleep literally two seconds after coming. Even though this man had become my favorite by this point, you did express an intense need for post-coital cuddling.

What did that leave us with?

Man #12 who was strong but tender. Who looked after the doll's needs ahead of his own. Who made sure each position had reached the apex of ecstasy before switching to a new position.

Man #117 who was an absolute specimen in the sack. If fucking was an Olympic sport, he would be its Michael Phelps. Golds in the frontstroke, sidestroke, backstroke, and reverse freestyle, no question.

Man #172 was somewhat clinical and robotic, but incredibly skilled. Not so good that you thought he must have been a rock star who'd had sex with so many groupies in so many ways that he couldn't help but be well-polished, but a man who, rather, seemed to have taken a unique interest in becoming skilled at a craft. Like a carpenter or sculptor might.

"So, you've seen my boyfriend have sex?"

"Not exactly."

"With a doll?"

"He's not your boyfriend yet."

"But he will be."

"Then, yes, I guess I have seen your future boyfriend have sex with a doll."

I was starting to wonder if this was all worth it. Would the ends justify these means?

"I won't ever hold it against him, Bex. I promise."

Kris had a slight smile on his face.

## THE FINAL TRIAL

"I'm so nervous, Kris."

"You don't need to be."

"But this is it. Today I will have a new boyfriend."

"Yes, I guess you will."

"What do the men think?"

"They know why they are here now. Sort of. They know that a woman, you, will be asking them what they want for the future. For the next one, five, seventy years of their and their future wife's life together. These men are some of the most engaging, moral, and honest men I have ever met. I back their answers 100%. They are straight shooters, no questions. You will be lucky no matter who you pick."

“That’s good to hear.”

“But I suspect one of them is THE one for you. I see no flaw in him whatsoever.”

“Hmmm...”

“Should be fun. You ready?”

“I’ll have to be. You’ve been rigorously testing these guys all month. It’s happened so fast. I can’t believe I’m going to finally have a man 100% perfect for me.”

“Good. Then you sit down here and I’ll turn on the microphone for you. There.”

“Test, test, test.”

“Now I’m going to go into the other room with Stephanie and the three men and when I give you the signal, start firing away. Remember, each man is separated from each other, so they can only hear what you specifically ask them. And, of course, their voices are going to come in distorted, robotic almost, so you aren’t overly influenced by a sultry timbre or anything.”

“But I do like a nice voice.”

“I can assure you all these men could do voiceover work for car commercials if they wanted.”

Kris walked into the next room, closed the door, and we began.

“Bex, can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

“OK, shoot then.”

This felt a little too much like a 1970s game show. I was getting anxious. I held down the button for Man #12:

“Hi...so...where do you see yourself in five years?”

There was a pause, and then a heavily-distorted, brusque voice came through, sounding like it does when 20/20 interviews some whistleblower who doesn’t wish to be identified.

“IN FIVE YEARS I SEE MYSELF LIVING THE LIFE MY PARENTS DID. I’M MARRIED TO THE WOMEN OF MY DREAMS. WE HAVE TWO KIDS WITH A THIRD ON THE WAY. WE HAVE DOGS, AS WELL. WE LIVE IN A MODEST TWO-STORY HOME IN THE SUBURBS. SHORT HILLS, NEW JERSEY.

PLEASANTVILLE, NEW YORK. NORWALK, CONNECTICUT.  
IT DOESN'T MATTER."

A nice enough answer, though a little trite. Kris's voice came through again.

"How was that, Bex?"

"Good."

"Don't worry, none of the three men can hear you speaking to me right now."

"I've always wanted to live in Pleasantville, myself. I can't believe there's really a city named that. Sounds so..."

"Pleasant."

"Exactly."

"Well, I don't want to influence you, but Man #12 is certainly a keeper. Let's move on."

I thumbed through my three-ring binder, over 500 pages of hand-written college-ruled loose leaf notes on my ideal man, complete with diagrams, charts, and sketches. I found something I most crucially needed to know. Or, at least, thought I needed to know, back when I started making this journal at age sixteen.

I held down the button for Man #117:

"How will you always make sure that my wishes are met?"

A brief pause, and then a voice that sounded like a highly-literate Transformer came through:

"\*I would\*put your needs\*always ahead of my own.\*I would never be\*afraid to ask you how you're\*feeling\*and what you want.\*I would expect you to always\*tell me\*what you needed\*me\*to do\*to make you happy.\*I would want nothing more than to make you happy.\*"

This guy sounded nice, but a bit like a doormat. I used to think I wanted a doormat. But one that said "Welcome!" not "Wipe Your Feet All Over Me."

This room was muggy. I wasn't feeling so well. I took a sip of my water.

I held down the button for Man #172:

"Describe your ideal wedding."

A voice came through like Rosie, the robot from The Jetsons.

"My ideal wedding would be whatever makes my future wife happiest."

I looked down at my notebook in my NUPTIALS section: "His ideal wedding should be whatever I WANT."

"Though, if I could have my say, I'd prefer a smaller affair. Inside instead of outside so my wife's hair doesn't get too windblown, absolutely no organ music, calla lilies on the aisles, funky table centerpieces..."

I looked at my notes: intimate, inside, organ music, calla lilies, interesting centerpieces, and...

"...and I'd prefer a DJ over a band. No wedding is complete without a sing-a-long to Fireside by the Dashboard Lights."

I smiled. It was like Man #172 had a cheat sheet for ME! Had Kris told him?

Yet I was kind of disgusted with myself.

I started sweating, hyperventilating. I couldn't talk.

I suddenly was unable to speak through the mic.

"Bex? Bex? You ready to ask another question?"

I felt faint.

"Bex?"

No, I couldn't take it any more.

"Bex? You all right?"

All these men were great. I'd be lucky to have any of them. And I'd subjected them all to the most horrific of trials, just for my own gain. I was such a narcissist. I was so awful.

"Bex?"

No longer would I be. I could change. Grow.

"Bex?"

I jumped from my seat and sprinted toward the door. I wanted to apologize, to Kris, and Stephanie. To the men. I wanted to meet all these men, see them in the flesh, talk to them, hear their real voices, determine if we could maybe start fresh, learn about each other, actually go on a date.



A huge smile cracked my face for the first time all month. I no longer felt queasy or icky. I was optimistic about the future, the new me. I opened the door, and burst into the next room.

“What the...?! BEX?!”

“Kris...?”

The room was empty.

There was no Man #12, no Man #117, no Man #172. There was no Stephanie. There was simply Kris sitting at a table, a laptop, some papers, and a microphone in front of him.

He looked stunned, but quickly gathered himself.

“You weren’t supposed to...to come in, Bex...”

“There was no trial?”

“Bex...”

“There was never a trial?”

“Bex...”

“There was seriously no trial?”

“Come on, Bex.”

“You made it all up? You made it all up!! Everything? Kris? Kris?!!!!!!”

I started to cry.

“There was never a trial?”

“There was, Bex. There very much was a trial.”

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# “The Narcissist’s Boyfriend: Self-Absorption in Mate Selection”

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## **Abstract**

People tend to desire those people that they think they should be attracted to as opposed to those who they actually are attracted to. The author suggests this occurs due to an intense narcissism and lack of metacognitive ability to understand others. Instead of asking, “How would we be together?” these people ask, “How would he be for me?” By putting a clinical female narcissist through four trials, the author found that these were not hardwired traits but rather learned personality disorders occurring due to a variety of modern-day external influences. The author posited, and was proven correct, that he would be able to strip these undesirable traits from the test subject and eventually make her more empathetic toward others. The author also found that he couldn’t make her fall in love with him, even though he is perfect for her.

# Health

Staten Island

It was both the best and worst annual day at his job. He always found himself trying to stifle laughter as the salesman showed him the latest. This year's hot item was an erect penis that actually simulated ejaculation. It came with seminal fluid refill kits which, when you ran dry, you'd load into the bottom of the unit, which was actually where the pubis bone would be on a normal human, not just a sturdy rubber cock pointed upward toward the room's fluorescent lights as if they were a nursery's blue spectrum metal halides and the unit was actually a tulip.

It simulated ejaculation when stimulated, har har, by the rather bland act of pushing a button on a tiny LED remote. You didn't have to, say, go hide in a corner, or behind a lab table, or under a tarp like you were at a Gallagher show—not that the kids knew who Gallagher was any more—because you didn't have to worry about the faux seminal fluid hitting you—unless you were

into getting peppered by a nine second rapid fire enfilade of one-half cup sifted, unbleached flour mixed with one cup of distilled water and a dash of Elmer's paper mache art paste brought together via light simmering—because the unit was only supposed to be simulated, stimulated, after a prophylactic was already firmly in place.

This year's catalog also included new items such as highly sophisticated intercourse puppets Ana-Tommy and Anna-tomy; educational board games Contraception (based on Concentration) and a Battleship knock-off meant to show how random and easily STDs could be passed on ("B-2?" "Ugh, you sank my...I mean, you gave me gonorrhea."); and countless new Blu-Ray releases; but product #97B, the ejaculation simulation, was the only one that had made Arthur Lampkin almost lose it and begin laughing. Which was something that salesman Thomas Jude would have surely made mention of to assistant school superintendent Deborah Henke, who also happened to be Arthur's fiancée, not that any one in the school district knew of this fact.

Arthur didn't even know why he bothered looking through the catalog every year. His school district's budget only allotted him \$250 per annum and that wasn't nearly enough to buy the more high end stuff. Item #97B, the ejaculation simulator, cost \$685 itself. That was an item more for private school budgets. Every year, Arthur was only able to authorize purchase of the same antiquated slide presentations that were in use when he was a student, a few lame brochures the kids would never read, and of course 10,000 condoms (an avg. of 6.4 per student) of a brand name he'd never heard of (Diplomats) and one whose integrity

he certainly didn't trust. Certainly for his own personal usage. Then again, his fiancée, upon the two of them getting engaged, had immediately gone on the NuvaRing (for a monthly co-pay of \$50) so he didn't need condoms at all any more, whether Diplomats or the finest KlingTite brand lambskins. Though, of course, Arthur knew that lambskin was totally porous and unsafe in protecting against STDs despite the high cost.

Arthur was, had somehow become, the sex ed teacher for the Horatio Alger Schools, a small group of five middle and high schools ranging from middle lower class to lower middle class socioeconomically and scattered throughout Staten Island. Most days he was transitory, hoofing it around on foot like a vacuum or carpet salesman trying to hawk his wares. Though, instead of trying to sell wet-dry uprights with fourteen accessories or 9,000 feet of cream heavy-duty, Arthur wheeled around a beat-up Samsonite carefully filled with all the sex ed tools he had acquired over the past seven years.

Most nights, assuming neither of them had meetings, Arthur would wheel his suitcase to the Staten Island Ferry where he'd meet up with Deborah to ride back to Manhattan together. Arthur never understood why Deborah so insisted he wait for her every day, because she would spend all twenty-five minutes of the ride talking on her Blackberry, recapping significant events of the day with each of her five schools' principals. Today, as Arthur watched Deborah yak away, he began wishing he was a cigarette smoker so he'd have some activity to keep him occupied. Unfortunately, he'd never even tried a cigarette once. His mother had scared

him away from all illicit substances from a very early age. Arthur had an iPod but he wasn't much into music so he never listened to it, and, though he was a voracious reader, the bouncing of the ferry made focusing on a book quite difficult. So Arthur typically stood on the top of the ferry, held firmly onto the rail, and felt the gusts blow through his hair, the little speckles of the Upper New York Bay splash occasionally onto his face as he dreamed. As he fantasized.

Children at lower income schools are notorious public masturbators. They aren't necessarily trying to be crude, and though they might even know better, they just can't help themselves. You see, and there was no truly PC way to say this, but since lower income school children were a little less intelligent—of course, through no fault of their own—they were also less imaginative. Higher income schools like, say, the East Medowick School District which Arthur had attended K through 12, rigorously encouraged kids to use their brains, their imaginations, to put on their "thinking caps" from an early age. And, thus, in the whole nature/nurture debate, these schools happened to form smarter and more imaginative children. Both in the classroom and elsewhere.

What this meant was that Horatio Alger children, unlike Arthur as a child, were unable to sit in their bedrooms privately and imagine nude men and women, think of the kinds of images that would titillate them and lead to them masturbating. It was only when they were out and about, when they saw an actual man or woman that they got excited and thus began playing with themselves.

Arthur thought they could easily curb this rampant public masturbation in their schools by just slyly distributing pornography to the children for them to take home—surely they could find tons of old Playboys and Penthouses on the cheap at a local flea market—but Deborah, always by the book and worried about how things would look to outsiders, quickly nixed that idea. So, instead, Arthur simply had to try and teach the children that masturbation should only be done behind closed doors, especially as a much safer alternative to sex. "How would you like if every time you wanted food, you needed someone else to cook the meal for you?" was an analogy he started his masturbation lesson with. "Pretty good, yo!" was a typical response he got.

Back at Whitehall Street on the other side of the bay, Arthur and Deborah would take the 1 Train back to their tiny studio high on the Upper West Side where they would immediately jump into bed. Not for sex, no way, but rather because the apartment was so tiny they had no other place to sit. So, they'd sit side by side in bed for the rest of their night, eating take out food, while Deborah would do school work on her laptop and Arthur would quietly watch reality television which Deborah would silently judge.

Above the head board of their bed hung their two undergrad diplomas from Harvard and MIT respectively. If lambskins didn't do a great job of preventing pregnancy, then a sheepskin from MIT sure did. A joke Arthur and his friends at MIT had often made during their years at the college, which Arthur had entered as a virgin. A biology major, he had met Deborah, a management school

major at Harvard, at a spring blue-grass festival along the Charles. It had been on the first night he had ever drank a beer, and that magical beer had somehow given him the ability to talk to this beautiful nerd. They were quickly in love, quickly each other's first love, each other's only love, and you could have even put scare quotes around "love" there to mean sexual partners, too, and after both graduated, they enrolled in Teachers Without Borders, expecting just to do the program for a year before enrolling in grad school. They both fell in love with teaching, though and, when the year was up, they decided to go back to school not for business and advanced molecular biology masters, but for education.

Their diplomas would have been right at Arthur's eyeline during missionary position sex, one of the only three positions Deborah would have sex in, if they still had sex. Arthur used to jokingly call his and Deborah's sex life pretty "vanilla," but at least it was an all-you-could-eat vanilla, like those buffets in Las Vegas with soft serve ice cream machines at the end of them. Now, however, the vanilla had melted away to nothing. Thus, Arthur masturbated a lot. Luckily, he had a remarkable imagination. Living in such close proximity to his domestic partner, he really couldn't watch any televised pornography, and he was too scared to ever visit adult websites on the school-issued Dell laptop he lugged around all day, even though he probably could have called it job research, so he really had no choice but to use his mind. He'd put on his thinking cap and dream about sex with the slinky midtown businesswoman he'd seen on the subway, fantasize



about finally getting to try doggy style with that new civics teacher, imagine actually getting a blow job to completion including swallowing. Then, he'd sprint to the bathroom, pump two pumps of Deborah's fancy vanilla bean moisturizer into his left hand, and peel one off in a non-suspicious amount of time. Returning to their bed, he always prayed Deborah didn't smell the vanilla wafting up from his crotch region.

Arthur was always humiliated, if not downright jealous when, during private consultations with schoolchildren, they'd explicitly and intricately discuss their sex lives with him and inadvertently reveal that theirs were more advanced than his. It sounded like they were bragging! Tenth grader Tony Luogo was well into double-digit notches on his bed post, despite sharing a bunk bed with his younger brother Tito. Eleventh grader N'ichelle Jardine discussed strange positions with such breezy familiarity that Arthur would wait until after their meetings to look up online just exactly what these positions entailed. And Twelfth grader Gilbert Cruz had already had several threesomes!

It certainly didn't help that in Arthur's rolling luggage he lugged around a large vulva made of soft velvet and satin which he would often use to show both the boys and girls the specific parts of their bodies or their partner's bodies that they might not be aware of. Which confused him. Why was he helping encourage kids to have good sex? If they wanted the kids to slow down on the fucking, should he have really been teaching them where the clitoris and G-spot was located? What did that have to do with good health?! As a sex ed professional, wouldn't he have been better

served trying to trick the kids into utilizing bad techniques? Or, better yet, having a non-sex life as boring as his and Deborah's which would eventually leave them disinterested in the whole shebang? Whatever the case, Arthur always felt funny giving advice to someone who could be called "mommy" or "daddy," even if said mother or father was eighteen years younger than his age thirty-two.

Arthur had once read in some magazine that you're officially in a relationship with someone the first time you sleep with them but don't "sleep" with them. That sounded pretty spot on, he thought, and especially incisive for some stupid women's magazine (meaning the magazine was stupid, not that it was a magazine for stupid women, although he imagined plenty of stupid women read the stupid magazine). There were some caveats, of course, to the sleeping and not "sleeping" thing. Maybe one or both of you had gotten too drunk earlier in the evening to perform. Or maybe you'd opted to merely engage in oral or anal sex for the night and didn't officially consider those to be sex, even though they had "sex" in the name of them. Or it could have simply just been that time of the month for the female. But, assuming those things played no part, if you were sleeping with someone and not "sleeping" with someone, you were in a relationship with them claimed the CityGirl magazine he'd been forced to read while waiting for Deborah's mani-pedi to be completed.

Arthur thought about that quote a lot and always wondered how it applied to religious people. Because, even though many of them might have "saved themselves" until marriage in the

sexual sense, surely they didn't wait until their actual marriage nights to first sleep side-by-side in bed together. That would be downright bizarre. It was a big enough dice roll to assume the man or woman you were about to marry would be sexually compatible with you, but to wonder whether he or she would be sleep compatible was a whole 'nother ball of wax. You didn't have to "sleep" with your spouse every night for the rest of your life but you almost certainly had to sleep with him or her. What if you didn't find out until a few hours after "I do" that your new spouse was a snorer, or a tosser and turner, or a restless leg syndromer? It was simply too risky.

Arthur had known many religious people from his childhood growing up in Manhattan, Kansas, but he'd never really explored their relationships to sex back in the day. He simply knew that next to no one was having any, himself included. And, ever since he'd become known as the one weirdo who not only left the state to go to college, but who also was majoring in some Darwinian shit, well, let's just say he had become the prodigal son around the Little Apple, not that he exactly knew what a prodigal son was since that was a story from the Bible which he still had never read. It was further strange to him that many of the New York City students he taught were just as super religious as his childhood classmates. But, while his friends at East Medowick High let their religiousness manifest into them being chaste, the students at Horatio Alger only brought up their convictions after they became pregnant. The rare religious student at East Medowick that actually had sex and then accidentally got

pregnant would always secretly have an abortion—there'd been plenty of murmurs—but all the kids at Horatio Alger had sex and it was only when they got pregnant that they'd invoke their religious beliefs to explain and justify why they wouldn't have an abortion, no way, no how, even though their lives would probably be much better off if they did (not that Arthur was allowed to say that).

Arthur realized that many of these kids probably just wanted to bring a new friend into the world since many of them came from broken and unloving homes. Their new baby would possibly be the first person who had ever loved them unconditionally. Thus, Arthur always tried to be a loving friend to his students, to show them that there was someone out there that cared for them despite what they might think.

Late Friday afternoon brought Arthur a typical meeting with a student. Kendra Broyles, a pretty girl who actually behaved herself and did well in school. Mr. Keller had even recently mentioned to Arthur that she was getting college scholarship offers, a huge rarity for Horatio Alger students. He'd hate to see her throw away a promising future just for some meaningless sex with the losers she went to school with so Arthur focused extra hard on letting her know he cared and wasn't there to judge.

Arthur had a policy to allow students to take as many condoms as they wanted, as often as they wanted, no questions asked, which lead to questions never being asked at all. That was why it was such a welcome surprise when Kendra starting grilling Arthur on birth control methods.

"Now, Kendra, there are several types of birth control...excuse me...'protection.'"

It had become mandated that condoms no longer fall under the semantic umbrella of "birth control" any more as that could be perceived as offensive to homosexual students who, of course, were practicing "birth control" simply by being homosexuals.

"There are lambskin, made of sheep intestines, which date back to the Roman Empire, the days of Julius Caesar who I believe you will be reading about in Mr. Keller's literature class later this year..."

A bit of a pedant, Arthur always liked to stress the education part of sex ed, as much as the sex part, especially to a rare sharp cookie like Kendra. Which didn't mean he also didn't try and act like a cool, hip, gettin' laid, knows the ropes kinda guy the kids could confide in about pregnancies and threesomes and orgies and sex positions he only had learned about recently via urbandictionary.com.

"However, we don't endorse lambskin in this school district because they are simply not safe enough in our opinion."

"Gross. Why would I want my man to put some lamb guts on his dick any way?" is what most of his students would have said when Arthur gave this little sexual history lesson, but Kendra coolly replied, "Yeah, I've read the same things online."

Arthur next explained about latex condoms and polyurethane and the new polyisoprene. He discussed spermicide Nonoxynol-9 which he explained coats the condom in too slight of amount

of spermicide to actually prevent pregnancy and which he noted had even been found to possibly increase the chances of HIV acquisition due to its propensity for causing micro-lesions in the tender mucous membranes of the vagina. He explained about the pill, The Pill (always capitalized in the same way The Bible usually is), and about all the other ways to prevent pregnancy and the spread of STDs as Kendra just sat there nodding. It was truly a bravura performance by himself, thought Arthur, the rare time he actually felt like he was making a difference in a child's life.

When he was finished, after he took a breath and sipped from his coffee mug filled with water fountain water, Kendra scrunched up her face in that look children get when they are embarrassed and struggling to get something off their chests. It was a face Arthur saw less and less as kids became less and less embarrassed by their behavior, less and less aware that things like filming each other having sex with a Flip Cam, or having a contest to see who could win an unofficial senior class superlative for Biggest Slut, or arranging an orgy via a Facebook group were outside the norm of typical teenage behavior.

"Mr. Lampkin, I'm really embarrassed to come to you..."

"Please, don't be, there's nothing to be embarrassed about, Kendra. Our bodies compel us to do weird things sometimes..."

"...but I feel like I need to."

"Go ahead, please."

"You see, it's my mom..."

Arthur got a lot of student visitors who wanted to discuss sexually inappropriate touching

acts perpetrated by family members and by now he felt at home handling it, getting to the root of the issue, calling children's services, even visiting the household to play a tough guy, saving these children, his children, from the awful lives they'd been dealt.

"She's a prostitute. Over on Richmond Terrace."

"Prostitute? Richmond...?"

"Terrace. Yeah. And Broadway. Anyway, Mr. Lampkin, I'm worried about her. She's not cut out for this life. She's smart. She used to be a paralegal at Wessen & Lang before she got laid off last year. She couldn't find anything else and she got desperate. She didn't know where else to turn and one of her disgusting cousins showed her this easy way to make a buck. Now, I'm afraid she's obsessed with it. She's gone all night, every night. I'm worried she's not being safe. She didn't have teachers like you when she went to school. She doesn't know these things. She had me when she was only fifteen herself. My dad, well, the idiot who fathered me, split town and headed to the Bronx before I was born. I've never even met him. And, my mom hasn't been with another man since. She's put all her time and effort into raising me. She did a great job. I guess now that I'm almost an adult and almost self-sufficient she thinks she can go back out there on her own. But she can't! I'm scared for my mom! I'm scared!"

Kendra fell into Arthur's arms, sobbing all over his Century 21 dress shirt. You weren't technically, legally allowed to hug children and, of course, Arthur never instigated hugs, but there

was no way he was ever going to turn away a desperate child who needed a hug, rules be damned.

"You have to talk to her, Mr. Lampkin. Tell her this lifestyle is dangerous."

Arthur knew more about female bodies than 99.9% of most females and he never even got to put that knowledge to good use. Of course, being one of only six non-janitorial males working in the entire school district amongst hundreds of female faculty and administration, scads of women hit on him thinking him single, not knowing that Arthur was with Deborah, especially since she never wore her engagement ring during school hours. But, of course, Arthur had to rebuff them all. Even if he'd wanted to cheat on Deborah, she would have easily found out.

There's no real great public transit system on Staten Island and the walk to Richmond Terrace took Arthur nearly twenty-five minutes. Luckily, it was a nice cool fall night as the sun started setting over New Jersey. On the first Thursday night of each month, Deborah met for dinner with several school administrator cronies from various school districts throughout the five boroughs. Arthur always cherished those first Thursdays as nights he could be his own man. Eat out on a burger or some buffalo wings, maybe grab a beer or two, watch some NBA games and the sleaziest reality TV possible, loudly masturbate (in bed!) til his heart's content.

Ms. Broyles wasn't that hard to locate being the only African-American amidst a group of Latinos. In real life, prostitutes don't look like they do in the movies, Arthur thought. He didn't mean he expected them to look like Pretty



Woman prostitutes. Of course not. He expected them to look like prostitutes on the other end of the spectrum: beat-up and spit-out drug addict types. But these girls, these women, looked fairly normal if not just a little less clothed, a little more dolled up. Ms. Broyles appeared shy, too, less brash and confident than her brethren, almost embarrassed to look Arthur in the eye when he asked: "Ms. Broyles?"

She turned toward Arthur and he felt the sudden urge to explain further.

"I'm your daughter's, I'm one of Kendra's teachers. Mr. Lampkin. Arthur is my name and I..."

"Mr. Lampkin. Arthur."

"Yes."

Ms. Broyles moved closer to Arthur as the other women scattered.

"What you want me to do for you tonight, Arthur? Suck your dick? Fuck you? Doggy style? Reverse cowgirl? I can get another girl and we can have a threesome. I can get all those girls and we can have an orgy. Or it can just be you and me. Any position you can dream of, any way you like it. I will make you come."

Arthur tried to stifle his laughter but he couldn't. He couldn't stop. He couldn't stop laughing.

# The Feminist

Long Island

Kelly Meyers was the most popular professor at Betsy Williams College. When Kelly traversed the quad each day he would get smiles and nods of affection from nearly every student. He was more popular than Linda Roberts who taught a much-beloved course on the importance of Wonder Woman in Post-War America. Than Suzanne Wendell who often held her classes outside on sunny days under the big Hall of Languages oak. Even than Imogene Carr who gave every student an A so long as they tried hard. He was also, despite his unisex name, the only male professor at this all-girls school.

Just five years earlier, Kelly had been making love to another in a long line of skanks in his messy apartment in upper Manhattan when his phone rang. The girl bobbing on top of him had been shocked he still had a landline in the year 2005. "I don't like to be easily reached," he noted, as they kept pounding away. His answering machine picked up. "You have an answering machine?!" She was even more shocked by this development. Modern women just didn't understand the irrelevance of state of the art technology, thought Kelly. "I like to see the awkward look on someone's face when they hear a message they shouldn't. Reminds me of a bygone era."

That particular answering machine message had been from one Dean Lady Bird Graham, named after the popular Second and then

First Lady, but nicknamed by most The Graham Cracker behind her ample back due to her tragically unhip whiteness. But Kelly didn't know any of these things just yet. All he did know was that Dean Graham was calling to urgently ask Kelly in for a job interview at Betsy Williams College that afternoon. Kelly had gotten his Masters at Columbia just four months earlier, but had, as of yet, been unable to get a professorial job, as shocking as that may sound, due to his mediocre grades at Columbia. "That's an all-girls college, you know..." noted the skank as she quivered in orgasm.

Kelly was nevertheless quite excited as he desperately needed a job and some money. He tossed the skank off him and burst out of his room to find his chubby and hirsute roommate, Gary, listening to the in flagrante delicto Kelly had been previously participating in. Gary wasn't as embarrassed as most people would have been at having gotten caught listening to a friend's love-making and Kelly was neither as mad nor embarrassed as most people would have been at catching someone listening to their lovemaking. The skank was appropriately as mad and as embarrassed as most people would have been if they had caught someone listening to their lovemaking but "I just fucked her, so fuck her," thought Kelly and "You just fucked her, so fuck her," thought Gary. "Fuck you both," said the skank.

Gary, too, was unemployed, if not unemployable, so he accompanied his friend on the longish drive out to Long Island toward Lopersville and Betsy Williams, talking about his idea for audio-only pornography for the first leg of the trip. On the second leg of the trip, Kelly wondered if it was true that Betsy Williams was an all-girls college.

"It most certainly is," Gary assured him. "My cousin went there."

"Is it 'all-girls' or 'all-women?' You have to be politically correct nowadays or they'll fire your ass before they even hire your ass. You'll get picketed. Colleges today are fucked up, man. Highly sensitive places. I wonder if they'll even hire a male teacher."

"Just pretend to be gay. That's almost like being a lady."

"That's insensitive, Gary, and cliched, too. And the plot of several terrible high concept movies."

"All academics are 50% gay."

"You're saying that half of all professors in America are gay?!"

"No, I'm saying that 100% of all professors are at least 50% gay."

Gary had a lot of weird ideas.

Kelly and Gary arrived at Betsy Williams around 3:00 PM. Kelly found the town of Lopersville to be charming, the campus to be stunning. True, it was in the middle of nowhere, but it stood as a tiny collegiate Eden unruined by fast food chains, strip malls, or frat houses.

"The chicks here are fucking smoking, too," noted Gary, who was likewise correct.

\*

Lady Bird Graham was quite surprised when the Kelly Meyers she went out to greet in her waiting room was a man. Men never applied for jobs at Betsy Williams—annually voted as U.S. News & World Report's "most" feminist campus in America—so unisex names such as Stacy or Dana never gave Lady Bird any pause. Not that there was anything wrong with men applying for the jobs, in fact, Lady Bird often wondered if she should actively try to get a male professor or two. "Know thine enemy" she often joked to herself, and only to herself, for she would never let her colleagues know she had actually read Sun Tzu, that awful patriarchal strategist, though admittedly, not as bad nor as macho as Machiavelli, she often thought.

She was respectful in her interview of Kelly, going through the same modus operandi, status quo, you know, that she would have gone through with a normal candidate, a female job applicant. She explained that they were rushing to fill a much needed empty slot for the fall semester, set to start in just five days, after the former professor in the position had gotten knocked up—not the word Lady Bird said out loud, she actually said "expecting," the exact same word the CBS censors made Lucille Ball say as opposed to "pregnant" or what have you when she got knocked up on I Love Lucy during the 1953-1954 season—by God knows whom and been forced to take a leave.

Lady Bird explained that the school was 100% female. Female students, female faculty and staff, even the janitors were

female, a recent addition in the last few years as Lady Bird thought women should be cleaning up each others' messes, not relying on men to always bail them out, even if that "bailing out" was simply to mop up a Diet Coke spilled in the dining hall, to empty a trash bin full of discarded tampon applicators. She intentionally tried to be somewhat crass and undesirable in this part of the interview, hoping Kelly would turn the job down. Lady Bird figured she could teach in a pinch if worse came to worse and she was unable to find someone. She had been a professor so many years ago back at Yale and thought it might be fun to have another shot.

Lady Bird also explained that they were pretty much screwed—she didn't say "screwed" though, she would never say screwed. If she was talking about intercourse she eliminated all words that made it sound as if intercourse was something a man did to a woman. Thus, she never said "screwed" or "fucked" or certainly "boned," "banged," "bagged," or even "made love to." She simply said "intercourse," "had sex," or "made love," lopping the "to" off the end. Likewise, she never even used these terms to refer to a situation being messed up. She simply said "things were messed up" or "FUBAR" if she was being a little saucy. Most people didn't know what the "FU" in "FUBAR" meant any how, just like most didn't know what the "FU" in "SNAFU" meant—now that they had called Kelly in for an official interview. They were screwed, it was messed up, this was a serious SNAFU and totally FUBAR because, now that Kelly had been called in for an official job interview, now that Lady Bird had met Kelly face to face, pursuant to New York State's recently passed Fair Hiring Practices, the mere fact that Kelly was the first and only male applicant they had had that year meant that, so long as he met all necessary criteria, specially lowered criteria of course, the criteria were always lowered to make things "fair"—and Kelly met them all, barely—she was literally forced to hire him.

The one class Kelly would be responsible for teaching would be Feminism 101, the first class that any and all freshman at Betsy Williams were required to take. She thought the fact that he would be teaching a low-level feminist class for rock-bottom pay would be the straw that dissuaded this camel's back.

"May I have an hour to take a walk and think about it?"

"Of course, Mr. Meyers."

At least he's gay, thought Lady Bird, though she immediately chastised herself for stereotyping.

\*

Gary hadn't wanted to go into the Laissez Faire bar because he thought it sounded "French and snooty," but Kelly thought it looked like a nice hole in the wall and, besides, there didn't seem to be any other bars around town where they could have a pint and discuss the job offer for fifty-five minutes.

"Holy shit, Kelly, what's the opposite of a 'sausage fest?'" whispered Gary as they entered Laissez Faire to find it, not unexpectedly, completely full of women.

It was obviously a dyke bar but Kelly liked watching Gary hold onto misconceptions about things, like him continuing to think LOL stood for "lots of love," making his e-mail sign-offs to his mother, "LOL your son," sound like he was mocking himself and rightly so.

They each ordered a can of Genny Cream with a Jack back from the bartendress and got to talking.

"That dean seemed like a real stick in the mud."

"She just doesn't want you to work here."

"You think?"

"Oh, sure."

"Well, maybe I shouldn't work here."

"Are you fucking crazy, Kelly?" Gary nearly grabbed his friend by his tie. "You're getting a free ticket to work in Elysian Fields, man!"

"What does that even mean?"

"I have no clue, but a lot of bars are named it so I assume it must be, like, paradise or something."

"I know what Elysian Fields means, I mean, why do you think it's a paradise?"

Gary just shook his head at Kelly, thinking he was the dumb part of their real-life buddy movie pairing.

"Because, you moron, you will be getting all these hot, young,

nubile chicks just a few months graduated from high school and the age of consent, yet before they know shit about the world. You'll be able to mold them into...why, into your personal sex slaves!"

Most all of Gary's ideas were ideas that were stolen from high concept movies. Not necessarily high concept movies that already existed, but surely ones that would one day. Trite, easy, borderline misogynistic ideas about how the world worked, how men and women (and gays, don't forget gays) related to each other, as if conceived by a perverted fourteen-year-old mind.

Then again, Kelly did need a job. Kelly looked around the bar, at the no-eds playing pool, darts, watching afternoon baseball, drinking pitchers of beers.

"Look at this miserable town, Gary. All they have is a single lesbian bar."

Gary looked around, finally realizing what he should have realized all along.

"Us men have been right all along. Women do only go to the bar to try to meet men. In a town without men, what's the point?"

"Great, then you'll take the job and we'll move to Lopersville," Gary insisted.

"We'll?"

"I got nothing to do, and I need a job."

"And...?"

"I could bartend here," noted Gary. "If I just shaved off my beard I'd look like a lot of these chicks."

"Don't call them 'chicks.' That's insensitive," replied Kelly, but he realized that Gary was right. He did look like a lot of these chicks.

\*

"Welcome class of 2009 to your first class of 2005, your first class of your college careers, Feminism 101."

\*

A dejected Kelly lumbered into Laissez Faire, bellying up to the bar where Gary washed a pint glass.

"You look like you had a rough first day."

"They all just stared at me. Like who the fuck is this dude teaching us? Who the fuck is this dude teaching us about feminism?"

"Like you were some circus freak."

"That's an insensitive term. How was your first day?"

"Incredible. You know, I haven't been beardless in five years? It feels so liberating to have shaved it off. I feel like I had been living a lie, hiding behind a hairy curtain, but now I'm free. I've even been hit on twice today. Everyone wonders who the new..."

"Guy."

"Well, they think I'm the new butch dyke in town. Until they talk to me. But still, from afar I was getting hit on!"

"By lesbians. Thus, from afar, you look like a certain kind of lesbian with your Brillo pad of hair and man boobs."

"But still...!"

\*

"Welcome class of 2010 to your first class of 2006, your first class of your college careers, Feminism 101. I'm professor Meyers and I thought it might be nice to start things off by having each of us discuss what feminism means..."

\*

"You're officially a seasoned professor now, buddy. One year closer to tenure. Then you can say whatever crazy shit you want with no repercussions. No more worries about fucking 'sensitivity.'"

Kelly smirked.

"And you're officially a bartender that people whisper about. 'He was here last year too. Is he going to work here the rest of his life?!'"

"Oh, they love me. They don't say that."



"I'll just have a beer."

"How did it go today?"

"Better. The incoming freshman have heard of me already so they aren't as scared. They aren't as curious about the one weirdo male."

"But are you getting through to them?"

"I don't think so."

"This is a long project, man, but it will be well worth the wait."

"I didn't get laid all of last year."

"Neither did I."

"You never get laid."

"If we both stick with our plans, this place will be our oysters."

\*

"Welcome class of 2011 to your first class of 2007, your first class of your college careers, Feminism 101. I'm Kelly and, as you can see, I am not feminine. I am not a woman. But that's OK..."

\*

"So how are this year's batch of chicks looking?"

"Don't call them chicks."

"Insensitive, right?"

"For the first time, I noticed that they were better looking. Why is that?"

"You know what Coco Chanel said..."

"You know what Coco Chanel said?!"

"The dykes and I talk."

"But they certainly don't wear Chanel. Look more like Dickies enthusiasts."

"Now who's being insensitive?"

"Noted."

"Well Coco Chanel said, 'There are no ugly women, just lazy ones.' These girls have become better looking because they've heard about you. They want to impress you. Obviously. Word is getting

around, man. For sure. We need to work on what you're saying in class a little more I would think. That's the real way to a woman's heart. Words. Audio pornography."

"I think I'm going to really enjoy teaching this year."

\*

"Welcome class of 2012 to your first class of 2008, your first class of your college careers, Feminism 101. I'm your professor, Kelly. As in, Kelly's my first name, like it could be any of your first names, although it could also be any of your last names, Kitty Kelly for example. But it's not my last name. My last name is Meyers. Just call me Kelly, though. It's great to see so many smiling faces out there and I think we're going to have a great time this year. This is my fourth year teaching this particular class and I'm really starting to, well, if I can kiss my own ass, get pretty good at it. I know I'm going to have fun this year, and I hope you all do too. So, feminism, what do we think about feminism...?"

\*

Kelly walked into Laissez Faire to find Gary sidled up to his new girlfriend, Rocky. They had started dating during the summer when Rocky had begun bartending there, herself. Everyone had heard of pet owners that were said to look like their pets, but until Gary and Rocky had started dating, I'm not sure many people had heard of straight men that looked like their lesbian girlfriends. And, they did. Gary had morphed in the last four years into essentially a dyke with a dick. Rocky loved dating someone she could throw back pitchers of beer with, eat hot wings with, wrestle behind the bar with. You'd have thought the other lesbians would have been mad at Gary for stealing one from their "team," but they all loved the jovial Gary so much that they totally endorsed this bizarre union. In fact, they even let Gary play on their softball team, though out in right field since he had such a rag arm.

"Welcome class of 2013 to your first class of 2009, your first class of your college careers, Feminism 101."

Kelly looked around the room. For the first time in his teaching career all eyes were on him. None of the students played with their phones or surfed the internet on their laptops or worked the crossword in the student paper (The Queen Bee) or even looked through the latest issues of US Weekly or CityGirl, magazines Kelly found totally despicable now more than ever.

"I am your professor, Kelly Meyers, but you can just call me Kelly or even K."

The students were quite attractive. That his-bian Gary was right. His plan had actually worked. These incoming students all knew about Kelly and specifically wanted to be in his class. They nervously tittered with each and every word he spoke.

"As you can see, I am not feminine. I am not a woman."

He loved having their attention, loved commanding the room, and wanted to be sure he delivered, got through to them. He was their matinee idol and it was a big responsibility.

"However, I am a feminist."

Girly laughs.

"I see a lot of looks around the room. 'A feminist?! How can that be? How can this man with his five o'clock shadow and rugged features and, uh, manly parts..."

Laughs.

"...be a feminist?"

Kelly proudly paced around the room, making brief eye contact with as many students as possible.

"Well, I would say to you, my new students, isn't a feminist just someone who thinks that woman should be 100% equal to men?"

After a moment, an increasing amount of "yes" nods.

"Yes? So, in that case, how can we respect any man who isn't a feminist?!"

Fifty-nine minutes later, Kelly exited the lecture hall,

feeling like he had finally taught that perfect class he'd been striving to teach for the last five years.

Once he was out of earshot, a few student whispers fluttered around.

"He's so hot."

"When are his office hours?"

"Is it really true he's gay?"

\*

It was working. It was finally working. That day Kelly proudly walked the quad, totally feeling at ease, proud to be a part of the Betsy Williams community. And they were proud to have him. Not just the students, but the staff and faculty too. Most all of whom smiled, nodded, or even back-slapped and "atta boyed" Kelly as he walked by them.

Even the Graham Cracker nodded in approval, real approval, when she saw Kelly. Something about him still felt a little off, but she had to begrudgingly admit that what she had thought would be a disaster of an accidental hire had actually been the best move, the best mistake she had ever made. Kelly was beloved by all, she couldn't deny that, and was doing a bang-up—she didn't say "bang-up," even in her head, it just sounded sexually patriarchal—with his Feminism 101 classes. He was an amazing professor, spot-on with his lectures. In fact, Lady Bird couldn't deny that Kelly was seemingly responsible for bringing Betsy Williams into the twenty-first century finally, making it a more modern, more progressive all-girls school. With such happy, excited, and pretty students ready to conquer the world in four years! Before Kelly, the typical enroller at Betsy Williams had been a bitter, angry, and lonely girl who was usually ugly, too. Lady Bird chastised herself for thinking such terrible thoughts. Lady Bird wondered if Kelly was single. She hadn't had a date in a decade.

\*

"Let's see...the date is...May 3, 2010...I am, of course, the

Dean of Betsy Williams College...Lady Bird Graham and this is a...uh, hearing...to examine several claims of sexual impropriety by professor Kelly Meyers..."

\*

After the hearing, after Kelly had been found guilty of breaking rules 10.11a and 10.11b in the faculty handbook, after he had been summarily fired from Betsy Williams and surely had his collegiate teaching career come to an unceremonious end, Lady Bird Johnson chased him down and caught up with him in the parking lot, wanting to speak with him some more.

She hadn't been in Laissez Faire since she was a twentysomething associate dean, but it seemed like the right place for the two of them to talk. She told Kelly that he had been a brilliant professor, a great professor at Betsy Williams, and she was so sorry that, by the book, she had to let him go.

Kelly explained that he loved the job, truly loved the job. It was the first time he had ever felt like he was doing good in the world and he, too, was sorry he had to be let go. But he understood. He had broken the rules. Many times over, in fact.

Lady Bird was mad these silly little students had tempted him. She knew he was a man, it was hard for men to turn down such temptation. She almost didn't blame Kelly. She almost blamed the students for forcing out such a great professor, a great professor they loved just a little too much.

She slid her barstool closer to Kelly, her knees touching his.

"It's just so fucked up, Kelly. It's just so fucked up beyond recognition."

# Comedic Romance

Hollywood

The beautiful brunette in the flowing dress walked with a purpose down a busy West Village street, though the street looked hyper-real. The sidewalks too perfect, even in how they were cracked and gum-speckled. The newspaper boxes too shiny and clean, like they were actually still installing new boxes for the dying media. The other walkers on the street a little too pretty, even for a very pretty area like the West Village.

Coming from the other direction down this hyper-real West Village street, a street you could somewhat recognize but not exactly pinpoint, came a handsome man in a tight t-shirt. Rugged and scruffy, chomping on some gum as if trying to get rid of its sugary flavor as quickly as possible.

As this handsome man neared a street corner garbage can—again, far spiffier than any Manhattan garbage can you've ever seen—he cavalierly spat the gum wad from his mouth, shooting it at the can, but missing just barely, the wad resting on the sidewalk. Moments later, the beautiful woman accidentally stepped in it.

The woman tried to lift her expensive shoe but it adhered strongly, creating an elastic affect which snapped her foot back to earth every time she tried to lift it in a tiny bit of physical comedy, though she was hardly laughing. She was

rather furious, yelling “Hey!” at the handsome and unwitting man.

The man turned and asked if “Something's the matter?”

“You spit your gum on the ground and I stepped in it. Now I can't get my foot up!” she cried.

“That wasn't my gum,” the rake replied with a smirk on his face.

“But I saw you!” she countered.

“If you saw me, then why did you go ahead and step in it?” he volleyed back, a wiseass grin plastered on his face.

“Ugh! Could you just help me!”

The man casually bent down and grabbed the woman's bare leg, looking up and cockily smiling at her as if he was touching her leg in a most romantic manner. The man finally removed her foot from the gum and, using a free newspaper from a bin, wiped her shoe clean.

“You're lucky I don't have you arrested!”

“For what?”

“For...for...for spitting gum onto the sidewalk!”

The woman stormed off in a huff and...the director called cut because this was just the opening scene in a soon-to-be blockbuster romantic comedy (working title: The One) directed by an intentionally eccentric director of some ambiguous Nordic origin who simply went by the name of Super-Sven (real name: Sven Erickson Johannes) and which was slated to be released by my company in the early summer of 2011.

The opening scene was what is called in my business—that business being the movie business—a “meet cute.” People in the business don't really use that term any more because it's been around since at least the 1930s and movie people have no regard nor knowledge for history—either movie or just historical history (why so many historical epics are historically devoid of accuracy)—but meet cutes still exist. Perhaps now more than ever. Hollywood's hacky like that. They are always the opening scene to a romantic comedy, a contrived encounter of two people under unusual circumstances, a purportedly comic situation created entirely

to bring these two seemingly opposite people together.

Back in the 50s and 60s, these opposites might be black and white or rich and poor or Jewish and Christian or even pretty and ugly. But nowadays, with all the PC bullshit and the desire to not offend any one less we potentially lose even a hair of box office share, we usually just make the “opposites” opposites in demeanor. Usually a cool, laid back stallion of a guy and some snooty cunt of a woman. I don't know about you, but I've never fallen in love after first hating someone's guts, but this must happen to other people a lot as audiences keep eating it up.

After Super-Sven called cut, Welsh actor Alexander Hugh Davies exhaled and smiled at his fellow actor and scene partner Shelly Clarke. It was weird to go from being contentious in a scene with someone to quickly being nice to them on the drop of a dime. The drop of a clapperboard.

Hugh was immediately apologetic to Shelly.

“So sorry I literally arrived a second before today's scene. My red-eye was delayed a few hours.”

“Don't worry about it. I know you had that project in, where was it...?”

“Easter Island.”

Super-Sven approached. He sported a silver fox head of bushy hair, a full beard, and wore glasses and a denim shirt tucked into jeans with white sneakers. For inspiration, he had noted during pre-production that he would be spending each day on set channeling a legendary director both on the inside and out. Today he was channeling George Lucas for some reason, perhaps due to the action content of the day's work. Super-Sven wrapped Hugh and Shelly for the day, asked them if they needed car service (both declined), and told them he'd see them for their 6:00 AM call the next day. Then, Hugh and Shelly were again alone as underpaid PAs cleared stuff from set.

“Um...what time is it, Hugh?”

Hugh looked at his watch, surprised at what he saw. “2:15?!” He laughed, quickly understanding, and tapped the Timex. “Fuckin' prop watch.”



Shelly laughed, too, and Hugh got an idea.

“Hey, if you got a few minutes, that kiss-up second AD gave me a decent bottle of wine. Would you like to share a glass with me? We should probably build some rapport or something being that this is the first day we've ever been around each other.”

Soon, both Hugh and Shelly knelt side by side in his trailer, looking closely into a mirror as they removed their make-up.

“What exactly do I call you, Mr. Alexander Hugh Davies?” Shelly wondered.

“Hugh is fine. Hugh is my name. I had to take that unwieldy name because of SAG. Some washed-up asshole who was on some sitcom in the 60's gets to be the real Hugh Davies. So annoying.”

“Well I'm the first asshole to be Shelly Clark, so other Shelly Clarks can be mad at me for the rest of time.”

Their conversations continued after a few glasses of wine.

“Have you worked with Sven before?” Shelly wondered.

“Once. On a commercial. He's a good bloke, bit of an eccentric, bit of a hack, but his movies do quite well.”

“My manager wanted me to do this project. I've never really done a romantic comedy before but he says I need a hit since I haven't had one in a few years.”

Hugh was shocked. “What about G-Spotting? I fuckin' loved that picture.”

“You saw G-Spotting?!” Shelly was even more shocked as it was a small indie film that only played four theaters in New York and LA and wasn't even available on Netflix as of yet.

“Of course I saw it. I specifically asked my agent for a screener. It was terrific. You were terrific.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Shelly lamented. “But it made about fifteen dollars at the box office.”

“Hey, fifteen bucks ain't so bad. Wait...was that domestic or international?”

Shelly laughed hard. Hugh had a great sense of

humor, she thought. Most actors were real stiff. Perhaps he was different since he was...she couldn't exactly tell but she thought Australian maybe.

"If it was something you wanted to do, Shelly, then you made the right decision to do it regardless of box office. You should always only do what you want to do."

Shelly smiled. He was funny and sweet. A rare combo. You typically had to be an asshole to also be funny. She suddenly felt a little tipsy. She wasn't one of those actresses that never ate so that even if the camera added those ten pounds they'd still look skinny as sin, she'd just been too busy on this day to eat, having only been able to snag some fruit from the craft services table during a brief camera set-up break.

"What time is it, Hugh?"

Hugh lifted his wrist toward Shelly.

"Remember? Prop watch."

Shelly glanced at the small twin-sized trailer bed behind Hugh.

"You ever slept in one of those things before?"

"I AM a movie star," Hugh half-jokingly boasted.

"Oh, so what, you take all your co-stars back to your trailer?"

Hugh feigned shock, putting his hand to his chest.

"You got a dirty mind, Ms. Clark. What I meant was, I AM a movie star so I usually sleep in a giant bed in my giant mansion. Not in a twin-sized bed in a trailer."

They were soon having sex.

The next day on set, Hugh (as character "Gary McBride") strolled into the Cock of the Walk past several clothed strippers gabbing. He briefly chatted with a busty blond named Erica about her lack of tips the previous evening. He took his place in the DJ booth and introed "Destiny" before she went on stage to dance for the lunchtime hour's few customers. Gary's boss, Guy Clemens (an overage frat boy archetype portrayed by popular TV star Mick Ritter), entered the booth to razz Gary for being late. Gary told Guy about his encounter with the pretty woman in the Village. Guy was

intrigued, you could tell his character was always intrigued when it came to women, and wondered if the women had “big fakies, long blond extensions, a slutty look on her face?”

“Quite the opposite actually,” noted Gary.

“Disgusting. So tiny mosquito bites, pale skin, and...” and here Mick (as Guy) shuddered, “dark hair?”

That afternoon Shelly (as character “Lizzy Olney”) acted frazzled as she arrived late to a college lecture hall packed with students. She walked to the front of the room where she was greeted by her flamingly gay T.A., Ricky (no last name mentioned in the script, portrayed by straight comedian Andy Stevens), before launching into a discussion with her all-female class on Third Wave Feminism, noting that just because society is patriarchal, it doesn’t mean women have to be stripped of their self-sufficiency.

After Sven called “cut” and “that’s a wrap,” Shelly was surprised to find Hugh still lingering by the playback monitors, being that he had wrapped several hours earlier. He claimed he liked watching his co-stars perform in order to aid in his own “craft,” but quickly and embarrassingly amended it into an admission that he really just wanted to ask Shelly out to dinner.

Shelly reluctantly accepted but told Hugh they couldn’t go to a restaurant in L.A. lest the paparazzi catch them and immediately start some buzz. Instead, she entered her address into Hugh’s iPhone and told him to come over for a home cooked meal at 9:00.

That night, as Shelly chopped veggies and prepared dinner, Hugh sat at a barstool next to the massive island in her massive kitchen and sipped on a beer. They made small talk.

“It’s nice to be home for once. My manager makes me occasionally go to all these awful celebrity restaurants just so people will take pictures of me. I didn’t want that to happen today. Not yet at least.”

“The paps don’t bother me in Hollywood.”

“But you’re really famous, Hugh.”

“Yeah, in Europe.”

“No one recognizes you here?”

“Oh, people recognize me. As Gerard Butler, Jeffrey Dean Morgan, Jackman. Never myself.”

“Well, do you get bothered when you’re back home?”

“Nah. They let me be. They’re proud of me: local boy done good.”

Shelly smiled.

“I’m embarrassed to ask this but us Americans just hear ‘sexy foreign accent.’ We don’t know whether it’s Irish, Scottish, Australian...”

Hugh smiled. “I’m Welsh.”

Shelly nodded. “Oh. Wales.”

Hugh was impressed. That dope, Mick Ritter, had thought he was from some country called Well.

While Shelly’s back was turned as she sauteed some garlic, Hugh flapped open the laptop on her counter and started surfing. He read something and smirked. Not an asshole smirk like the way he smirked when he was portraying Gary McBride in *The One*, but a more pleasant smirk. Shelly turned over her shoulder, curious.

“What are you smiling at?” she wondered.

“You know how the first date is all about questions? Like a job interview. Just like you asked. Where ya from? Where’d you grow up? How are you parents? Where’d you go to school?”

“Right.” Shelly wondered whether this was technically their second date being that they’d already been drunk together, slept together, and, well, actually slept together.

“I hate that part of dating. So boring.”

“I’m sorry.” Hugh disarmed her, but she liked the feeling. Maybe it was the Welsh accent.

“No big deal. But it’s nice to go on a first date with a celebrity. I don’t have to waste time asking you those questions. I can just pull up your Wikipedia page and...”

Shelly dropped her spatula and sprinted over to the island to find Hugh actually on her Wikipedia page.

“...see you were born in Durham, North Carolina. Grew up in Charlotte. You made your screen debut at age

twenty-one, you like to golf...hmmm...interesting. And it looks like Autograph magazine named you the second rudest female celebrity autograph signer of 2009.”

Dismayed, Shelly leaned in to read her own Wikipedia bio, quickly scanning the screen.

“Hey! It doesn’t say that!”

She snapped the laptop close. She found Hugh incredibly charming. Soon, their home-cooked meal was a home-burned one and they were having sex for the second time, in her enormous bedroom on her enormous canopy bed.

Afterward, they discussed what was happening between them. Hugh claimed he had never hooked up with a costar, heck, a fellow actor before. Shelly felt like she shouldn't believe him, but for some reason she did. She had to wonder why, though. He noted that he took his work very seriously and, until meeting her he'd never wanted to lose focus just to dip his pen in the company inkwell.

“I'll thank you not to call my vagina an inkwell,” cracked Shelly.

That was the line that made Hugh fall in love with her. Shelly had already fallen for Hugh. They'd barely known each other twenty-four hours.

Principal photography progressed with eccentric Sven shooting in sequence despite the \$2.5M in additional costs to the studio. On the day Sven wore a bald cap with a pasted on ginger beard, Gary and Lizzie bumped into each other again, this time at a neighborhood coffee shop where she was a little taken aback to see him studying a text on Marcus Aurelius. “You're into the Stoics?” she asked, clearly shocked that this man she had thought nothing more than a Neanderthal was into something so cerebral. “I wrote my thesis on Stoicism at Princeton,” she added. She walked out of the coffee shop and couldn't help but catch herself grinning.

On the day Sven wore an E.T. ball cap, glasses, and a salt and pepper beard (he was beginning to realize there must be something about directors and their beards), Lizzie and Ricky attended a Yankees/Red Sox game. Ricky complained

about always having to attend “boring” baseball games with her. Lizzie told him to enjoy the night air and eat his hot dog. Ricky made a mild sexual entendre about hot dogs. On the other side of the stadium, in the bleachers, Gary and Guy slugged beers and Guy taunted the Red Sox right fielder. Gary mentioned to Guy the amazing fact that he yet again ran into that pretty brunette and he, yet again, didn't have a chance to get her name or number. Just then, on the Jumbotron, the “Kiss Cam” was turned on, a popular segment between half-innings during which the camera quickly scans the ballpark, looking for couples, and encourages them to smooch each other for the entire 50,000-plus in attendance to see.

“It's her!” yelled Gary when the “Kiss Cam” parked itself on a shocked Lizzie and Ricky. Lizzie was even more shocked when Ricky planted a big kiss on her kisser. “Why did you just do that?” she screamed, after the cameras were off them. “Just givin' the fans what they want,” noted Ricky. “I guess she has a boyfriend,” lamented Gary. “Go track her down any way, that guy looked like a real fruit,” added Guy, a line we at the studio hoped wouldn't be flagged as discriminatory by GLAD.

Hugh and Shelly's second date took place at Hugh's Santa Monica rental home and, smartly, he ordered some sushi in. They fed each other hand rolls while playing a little game Hugh had just invented on the fly: all they were allowed to discuss that night, he said, were terrible things about themselves. Hugh figured that, since they were celebrities, and since so many terrible things were always said about them, they might as well lay their honesty cards on the table before going any further. Shelly agreed.

Hugh revealed that he had been married, but for just a week, to some girl he'd met on a vacation in Thailand who may or may not have been a prostitute.

Shelly revealed that she'd had her breasts augmented.

Hugh revealed that he had briefly dabbled in cocaine in his early twenties.

Shelly revealed that she'd had a year-long affair with

a very famous man who was still married to his very famous wife who still didn't know.

Hugh revealed that, despite what her agent told her, he was actually making double her salary for *The One*.

Shelly revealed that she really had a thick North Carolina accent but that she worked really hard to lose it so that she'd be more castable. Hugh thought that was cute and made her show him what she really sounded like. When she did, he laughed and mimicked her the best he could. "I don't think you'll be getting cast as a gal from the Carolinas in any upcoming films," she giggled. They ended that night in Hugh's California King, yet again having passionate sex.

From there, their romance progressed like most normal romances progress, even despite the fact they were A list celebrities (well, Hugh was actually B list in America, but who's counting?).

The movie proceeded according to the Aristotelian Drama Pyramid as run through an American rom-com *Mad Libs* fill-in-the-blank, despite Sven insisting he was making something "sui generis," a word he'd just learned after having skimmed through a biography of Stanley Kubrick (another be-bearded director) on his iPad during his last cross-country flight.

Hugh and Shelly started boosting the national sex averages of fifty times per person per year at four minutes per time by having sex ten times per week (over the next two weeks) at an average of seventeen minutes per time if a "time" was defined as starting at Hugh's entry and ending at Hugh's orgasm, which was a totally archaic and patriarchal way to measure these things, but even your prototypical left-leaning pro-women Hollywooder, like myself, probably couldn't have come up with any better way of measurement.

Gary and Lizzie continued to run into each other, pretend to hate each other despite the obvious sexual attraction and tension, think about each other, then head back home to masturbate to those thoughts (the latter, of course, never filmed nor shown nor mentioned on screen because us producers were hoping for a more viably lucrative PG-13 rating.)

Eventually, their relationship reached a certain point of seriousness, even though Hugh joked that nothing in his life was “serious.” It’s why he’d become an actor in the first place and not some boring CPA like his father. “I’ve never understood why when you decide to commit to someone monogamously you have to tell people you’ve gotten ‘serious.’ Because we haven’t,” he told Shelly. “Haven’t we decided to commit to each other because all we’ve done is laugh the last three weeks? There’s been nothing serious about it at all. Just fun. Instead, can’t we tell people we’ve finally decided to get ‘comical’ with each other?” Shelly laughed.

Gary and Lizzie were seriously getting sick of randomly running into each other at the bodega and the grocery store and the bar, especially in such a large city like New York, when the forces of nature, the parameters of simplistic scripts, insisted that something occur at the end of what was called Act One, in order to catapult the action to a new level, to “up the odds,” and make you wonder “What next?” In good scripts this was handled effortlessly, subtly, realistically. In Pierce Underwood’s (author of previous rom-com smashes *Status Update*, *Plus-One*, and *Groomzilla*) script, this was handled by Gary amazingly being the only person to sign up for a \$550 eight-week summer course on Corporate Feminism that Lizzie was teaching for the Learning Annex, a dramatic stroke only more farcical than their meet cute.

There are no second acts in life, they say, but since Hugh and Shelly were now in the second act of *The One*, they were spending everyday acting across from each other, which was great, despite the contentiousness of these scenes dramatically. They were likewise spending two to three nights of every week with each other, and all forty-eight hours of the weekend, mostly indoors.

Lizzie was furious and embarrassed. Embarrassed only one person had signed up for a class she was teaching to supplement her income so she could afford to take a sabbatical semester to help abused women in Vermont at the start of fall; furious her one student was this “frat boy” who



was clearly only taking the class to annoy her. Despite his ever present smirk, Gary insisted his reasons for taking the class were honorable, he was truly interested in learning the subject matter, something us as audience members skeptically believed despite what we knew about his character.

Staying in each other's mansions having sex marathons was great, but Hugh and Shelly began desiring the ability to leave the house together, grab a drink, dinner, see a rock show, shop on La Brea, simply hold hands on set and let it be known they were together. Shelly's manager publicly "outed" their relationship by "anonymously" tipping off one of his Hollywood blogger friends that the new couple would be dining al fresco that evening at Beep-za (a hip neo-pizzeria that made brick oven pizza that tasted like it just came from the microwave) where they shared a medium Veggie Addicts pie.

As the film progressed, the two-dimensional supporting characters in Gary and Lizzie's life became even less dimensional, now simply used as occasionally appearing sounding boards for our main characters to work out problems without the script having to resort to clunky, "on-the-nose" narration.

All the tabloids and blogs were excited about the new romance between Alexander Hugh Davies and Shelly Clarke. I was even more excited as it was giving our film tons of free buzz well before principal photography had even wrapped.

On the morning Sven wore a suit over top a fat suit and kept saying in a jowly drawl, "Gooooood evening," Gary and Lizzie accidentally kissed each other during a late night study session. They quickly retracted their heads and acted like they were disgusted with each other.

Hugh started getting annoyed that just going out to grab a bite or a pint, even if he was alone now, had become a media circus. Shelly thought he should be thankful that the simple act of dating her had made him into a much bigger celebrity on these shores. Hugh reminded her that he may have been less famous than her, but he was still getting a larger salary than her. "Plus points," he added, a fact she hadn't known and which he hadn't shared with her until then.

Gary wondered aloud to Guy why Lizzie retracted so quickly from kissing him, even when she clearly wanted it just as much him. “Must be because she's still dating that fruit,” insisted Guy, the second time Guy had called Ricky a “fruit,” something that would surely be noted by GLAD.

With only ten days left in shooting, and only six weeks into their relationship, Hugh told Shelly that he thought they should quit seeing each other. He was still attracted to her, but perhaps that's all their relationship ever was: a sexual relationship. “Love at first sight is easy in a business where all your co-workers are a sight to behold,” he noted, which Shelly thought sounded both like a complement and a slam and, perhaps, a confirmation that he had actually done this kind of thing before despite what he'd initially said.

As Act Three drew to a close, on the last day of their class together, Gary told Lizzie his feelings for her. Lizzie was torn, trying to fight her own clear feelings for Gary. Yet, all she could do was tell him he'd gotten an “A” in her class. Gary left the building distraught, confused as to why Lizzie wouldn't fall for him the way he'd fallen for her. That night, he went to his job at the strip club where we learned that he wasn't working at the strip club for some sleazy reason. He wasn't even working there just to earn a little extra loot, no, he'd been working there as a secret way to observe strippers and strip club owners in their environment for a massive academic book he was writing about the feminism of strippers. Unfortunately, only us in the audience learned this and not Lizzie, who had decided, on her own, that she really was in love with Gary and wanted to go tell him. Using the address he'd used in enrolling for the class—a class he was taking in order to help him with his book—she excitedly marched over to “West 45th and 7th Ave” looking for Gary's apartment but instead finding Cock of the Walk...and Gary inside introducing “Heartlights” to the stage for a dance. Lizzie was disgusted and dismayed and fled the scene. Gary never saw her.

Luckily, both Hugh and Shelly were professionals and were able to finish out their shooting schedule with no problems arising on set.

On the last day of shooting, our set designers had turned soundstage G into a replica of Grand Central Terminal for what I was certain would become an iconic scene in the genre, despite its real-life inaccuracies. Like in any good rom-com, Pierce Underwood had used this final scene to recall something from the opening scene, the meet cute. When Lizzie had fled the Cock of the Walk dismayed, Guy, outside smoking a cig, had curiously noticed her, mentioning to Gary that he thought he saw “that chick you wanna pork” come into the Cock. Now Gary was the one dismayed, telling Guy he had to jet. He sprinted to Lizzie's apartment, but she wasn't there. Taxied over to her classroom where he found Ricky, who informed Gary that she had decided to leave early for Vermont and, in fact, was probably about to board her train right about now.

Gary hauled ass to Grand Central where he amazingly saw Lizzie hauling ass, too. He tried to catch her but she was fast, allowing us to recall when she had mentioned she was a college sprinter at Vassar in what we thought was an off-the-cuff manner in the Second Act. Our shooting day began with Shelly (as Lizzie) bursting through the revolving doors into Grand Central and Hugh (as Gary) following suit some fifty feet behind. Here, Gary realizes, and so do we, as locked-in audience members, that if he is unable to stop Lizzie from boarding the 8:25 to Vermont then they will never be together. Which we want them to be.

Gary calls after her. “Lizzie! Lizzie! Lizzie! I love you!!!” But she either can't hear him, or doesn't want to. Soon, she is sprinting toward track 124, her track, where the train to Vermont is calling “All Aboard,” about to leave, yet Gary still can't catch her. Down the track she goes. “Lizzie! Lizzie! Lizzie! I love you!” he calls.

Finally, Gary has an idea. An idea? Heck, he has no choice. He pulls a piece of gum from his pocket and begins chewing. Once it's a sticky wet wad he hurls it ahead of him toward Lizzie, but his throw is too short. He tries again. Again, too short. And again, one last throw before she will

be on the train, about to leave the station. This wad of gum lands just inches in front of her and Lizzie doesn't notice and she accidentally steps in the gum—in the same shoes she was wearing in the opening scene—and she can't get her foot unstuck and her train pulls away and Gary pulls up and they look at each other and both are panting hard and Lizzie kind of looks mad.

And he says: “Lizzie, I love you. I can explain.”

And she says, “How about you unstick me?” but she's finally smiling. And then they hug and kiss.

It was the little things like this that made the audience feel smart and as if they had been along for the entire ride of a couples' romance from meeting cute to finally falling in love.

Privately, during that shooting day, Hugh had told me he was furious at how Shelly kept missing her mark. Later that same day, Shelly told me she was pissed they'd cast such a “rag-armed Welshman” in the role as his weak throws of the chewing gum kept messing up the blocking.

A few months later, at the public premiere at the ArcLight, it was no surprise to me that all the “normal” people in attendance went crazy for *The One*, it was clearly going to be a hit with the female demographic and make me a bundle. I heard a group of twentysomething girls beside me even say, as the lights went up, “I want that. I want a Gary.”

Walking out of the theater, I caught up with Hugh and Shelly begrudgingly holding hands so the paparazzi could get it on camera as they exited, still forced to pretend they were dating and in love for the sake of the picture and to counteract the internet buzz that they'd broken up. I stood behind them and between them, my arms resting on their shoulders, as they graciously fielded a few questions from entertainment reporters.

“Hugh, Shelly, great picture! Are you guys planning on making a sequel?”

Hugh and Shelly looked at each other and smiled big, as if they were two people still madly in love, pondering

their next move, their next movie. They were truly great actors, great stars. They both turned back to the reporters and spoke the same words at the same time.

“We'll have to see how things go...”



we met.

-He was such a coward.

-Totally. We still joke about that.

-How'd it happen?

-First of all, Sar, I totally thought this weekend was just an anniversary gift. It's like, the fourth gift is supposed to be for fruits and flowers, though.

-Huh?

-I know. Totally. I Googled it and everything. Fruits and flowers?! What, like, he's allowed to just stop at the bodega on the way home from work and buy me some cheap roses and a carton of sliced honey dew? No way.

-You deserve more than that.

-I know. Luckily he suggested this B&B. At first I was like, "Aren't those full of old people that are about to die but still like holding hands and kissing each other?"

-And you have to eat breakfast with them every morning?!

-Right. I know. I thought the same thing. But he showed me Owl Creek's website and it looked totally nice. Plus, he got us a king deluxe suite.

-Sweet.

-Totally sweet. Balcony overlooking the creek, king size bed, and a bathtub jacuzzi. \$425 a night, minimum two nights. Totally romantic.

-Ew, do you think the old people, like, get in the jacuzzi naked together?

-That's sick, Sar. Don't make me think about Mr. and Mrs. Capshaw like that.

-Who's Mr. and Mrs. Capshaw?

-Oh, yeah, they're the old couple we sit with at B every morning. Retired, and totally cool. But wrinkly. You wouldn't want to think about them naked.

-Sorry.

-No prob.

-So today after B...

-What was for B...?

-Delicious maple glazed french toasts with organic Greek yogurt and freshly squeezed mimosas. There's, like, farms and stuff in the area that provide all the food. Really good. And healthy.

-Yum. I had to have brunch with Monica today. Alone. Wish you had been there to bail me out. She's so crazy. She spent the whole time talking about how she's in love with this married guy in her office. And they even kissed the other night secretly while they were both working late. And you know the worst thing? I've seen his pic on Facebook. He's totally ugly.

-Do you want to hear about my day or what?

-Oh. Sorry.

-So after B we're both stuffed and I just want to go back to B and lay down for a bit, watch TV maybe. Even though they don't even have cable here. Just, like, boring local channels and stuff. Friends re-runs around the clock.

-I miss Friends.

-But he was like, "We didn't drive all the way up here to sit around all day."

-I'd love to sit around all day in a room that expensive.

-Me, too. But he had a point. He suggested we go on this nature walk.

-Since when is he into nature?

-I know! That's what I said! Ever since I've known him, the only time he likes being outside is if he's at a beer garden or golfing. But he insisted that everyone told him this trail led to the most beautiful sight in the state.

-Which was?

-A waterfall.



-Aw...so romantic.

-Totally. But it gets even better. You know I'm afraid of heights, so he was like, "Wear this blindfold while we walk over this bridge to the falls. As we're walking, I started thinking, "Oh my god! I wonder if he's gonna propose now?"

-Smart.

-But I put that out of my head because he has commitment issues.

-He wouldn't even let you move in with him until a few months ago!

-I know! So we're walking and he's leading me for what seems like forever. I feel little bugs biting my legs cause I'm wearing that cute romper that exposes them.

-Yuck.

-And tree branches are swinging by my head, right near my sunnies, which are over my blindfold.

-Ow.

-And water rushing below me.

-I would have totally started feeling sick.

-Finally, he's like, "We're here." He takes my blindfold off and we're not alone. There's this group of Mexican dudes with guitars.

-What?!

-They start playing this, like, serenading song...and then he got down on his knee, even though he was wearing his nice \$115 J. Crew khakis I got him and the ground was dirty.

-Did you freak?

-No. I thought he'd lost a contact or something.

-I didn't know he wears contacts.

-Then he's like, in an all serious voice, "Elizabeth Connors, everyday since the day I met you has been better than the last day. I'm already lucky, but will you make

me the luckiest man in the world..."

-And...?

-"And be my wife!"

-So romantic!

-He pulled this Tiffany's box from his Vineyard Vines jacket pocket and I just started flipping. Screaming. He put it on my finger and I started crying and we started hugging.

-What's the ring look like?

-Lucida cut, one point five carats, platinum band, solitaire setting. I'll upload pictures of it on Facebook after I get off with you. I've already taken like a hundred.

-Wow. How much?

-Sarah!

-Sorry! Was just curious for when it's my turn with Scott.

-\$14,500.

-Nice. How'd he know what to get?

-You know he's totally old-fashioned and would never let me go shopping with him for it. So I had to be sneaky. I dropped tons of hints. Cut things out of US Weekly, like the ring Hugh got Shelly earlier this year.

-I love them.

-Printed printouts off the computer at work. Told him that princess cuts are gross and pink diamonds are white trash. I totally schooled him. I'm sure by the time he went in to buy it he felt like an expert. He may have thought he picked it out by himself but I totally put the correct thoughts in his head.

-Can he not hear you right now?!

-Oh, no. I'm on the balcony with the door shut behind me. He's inside laying on the B, drinking a beer, and watching football.

-He probably just proposed so he'd have the whole night free to watch the big game while you call everyone.

-Ha. I'm sure.

-Was I the first you called?

-Yeah.

-That's so sweet.

-I mean, after my mom.

-Of course.

-And my sisters.

-But you're not close with them.

-And Robin.

-Robin?! But I thought we were best friends. I've known you much longer than her.

-We are best friends, Sar! Don't worry. She was just in my iPhone ahead of you. Alphabetically.

-But I'm gonna get to be maid of honor, right?

-Of course.

-Good.

-If I have a maid of honor.

-What?

-I may not have one. Or I may have two. You and Robin. And my sisters maybe.

-But I'd at least be one of them, right?

-Of course!

-Are you gonna get married back home? There's no good venues there.

-I know. I'd have to get married at the Lion's Club or the bowling alley or something. Gross.

-Ha!

-I think I might want a destination wedding.

-Oooh. Where?

-Maybe Puerto Vallarta. Or Playa del Carmen. On the beach.

-Nice. But then you won't get to wear a good dress.

-Oh, I'm wearing a good dress. My mom already has me an appointment at Kleinfeld's for next weekend.

-Can I come?

-Please do! We'll have a girl's day. Drink champagne and try on dresses and stare at my ring.

-Count me in.

-Counted.

-What's he want to do for the wedding?

-Who cares?

-Ha!

-It's my day.

-It's your day. Totally.

-I'm so glad this day is finally here.

-Were you worried it wouldn't be?

-Not really. But kinda.

-How come?

-Well, you know he has commitment issues. And he used to always say marriage is dumb. He'd quote this stupid famous quote from Albert Einstein about marriage being an attempt to make something lasting about an accident.

-Huh?

-Don't ask me. You know how guys are.

-Scott's the same. So, what did you do? What should I do?

-A few weeks ago I just told him: "Look—you propose to me now, before the end of the year, or I'm leaving you."

-Smart.

-It worked!

-Of course it did. You made him an offer he couldn't refuse.

-I can't wait to be married. I can't wait to have a wedding!

-It's going to be so romantic.

-OK, I totally gotta get off the phone with you, sweetie. I got so many more calls to make tonight.

-I bet.

-And my iPhone is dying.

-Don't forget to put those rings pics up on Facebook tonight.

-I won't.

-I'm so happy for you!!!

-Thanks.

-Send my congrats to Chris, too.

-I will.

# Born. Again

St. Louis

Before grabbing a cab to JFK, David stopped into Duane Reade for one more thing. He juked through the over-stuffed labyrinthine aisles toward the back of the store and the prophylactics section. He always hated buying condoms. Not because he was embarrassed, the reason most people hated buying condoms, but for two others reasons. Firstly, condoms were expensive. Overly expensive, he thought. Though, can you put a price on not getting disease-riddled and kid-addled? He supposed you couldn't. But, David mainly hated having to sort through all the choices. Trojan, Durex, KlingTite. Reservoir tipped, ribbed, lubricated. He always opted for spermicidal, liking how violent it sounded toward sperm, like it was a homicidal killer of his little swimmers. It was so much better to order condoms online, where you not only got a huge price break for buying in bulk, but where you had time to carefully peruse the rubbers' specs without old Murray Hill shoppers gawking at you.

Meanwhile, Jessica was gassing up her Four Runner at a Texaco station just off I-70 in Independence, Missouri. At the

last second, she too remembered one more thing and headed into the gas station's tiny mart hoping they had some in stock.

Both David and Jessica were headed to St. Louis where she was to pick him up at Lambert International Airport, at the Delta terminal, after his 11:48 AM flight arrived. They had initially fought about what city to meet in. He, of course, wanted her to come to Manhattan for the weekend, even though he was embarrassed by his squalid little studio. She wanted him to come to Kansas City where she assured him she had so many rooms in the suburban house she owned that she could give him three guest rooms if he needed the space. She refused to come to New York because she was both a little scared of the city and a little scared of him. He refused to go to Kansas City because he thought it boring and there were no direct flights there. After some haggling, they decided to spend their first weekend together in a city halfway between them. In David's mind, halfway between the ~1200 miles separating Manhattan and Kansas City would put them in either Chicago or Louisville, either city of which he would have gladly accepted. Chicago was a great town, the second best in America he figured and he thought he could probably squeeze in a game at Wrigley and some good carnivorous dining. Louisville would have also worked for him as he'd always wanted to go on the Bourbon Trail and drink his way around the state.

Jessica nixed both his ideas, insisting that, though the mileage to either Chicago or Louisville was somewhat halfway, it truly wasn't since she would be driving and he would be flying. Jessica was scared of airplanes and flew as rarely as possible. She insisted that they should judge "halfway" via travel time as opposed to mileage. His flight was a little over two hours so Jessica said they should meet within two hours of Kansas City. David found that farcical. Mainly because a two hour radius of

Kansas City would have put them in such hotspots as Columbia, MO; Joplin, MO; or Manhattan, KS. No, thank you. Also, though, New York to St. Louis via air travel wasn't merely a two hour trip for David as a cab to the airport would take him a good thirty minutes, plus he'd have to wait at JFK for at least an hour or two. Ultimately, Jessica afforded him a four and a half hour trip and that was how they picked St. Louis. David wasn't thrilled that he would be paying \$450 for his traveling leg of the trip while Jessica only paid an estimated \$30 in gas, but she quickly allayed his unexpressed but transparently growing concerns by footing the bill for the two night's stay at the Marriott.

They had met at their high school's ten year reunion earlier that summer in Tulsa. Or, rather, re-met. There was no way they hadn't interacted at least once during their four years at Half Hallowed Hills High, though neither David or Jessica could remember specifically being around each other a decade previous, especially since she took honors classes and he didn't, though both admitted that each other's names rang a definite bell. David wouldn't have typically attended his reunion and he rarely returned "home" to Tulsa even though his parents still lived there, but he was incredibly horny. He was embarrassed to admit it, even to himself, but the only reason he had attended the reunion was to try to get laid. His girlfriend Jenn had dumped him just four months previous and he hadn't had any sex since then, when, coupled with the sexless final three months of their relationship, meant that he was in the midst of a long cold streak. And, true, shelling out some \$500 to fly home seemed like a high price to pay, David had been certain some former classmate would have sex with him at the reunion. You see, him simply living in New York gave him an amazing amount of cache in Midwestern society. Most of his classmates still lived in Tulsa, or, at best, Oklahoma City or Kansas City.



Then again, most of his classmates also were happily married, happily parents, happily fatter than shit.

That's why he had been so pleased to re-meet Jessica. Glowing hazel eyes, long flowing auburn hair, the cutest freckles across the bridge of her nose, freckles you could tell she was still a tad embarrassed about by the way she tried to mute them with a slightly heavy brush of concealer. She had a great body too, tall and thin. And thin by, like, New York standards, not Midwestern standards which were far more lax.

Jessica thought David was a cutie the second she saw him, alone and preparing a plate of food at the buffet. He didn't look like any of the other 235 men at the reunion, most of whom she knew, or at least knew their wives, her former classmates. David wore a suit that actually fit, not a fabric-laden suit he was swimming in like the other tacky men in attendance. "Who's that?" Jessica had asked Annamarie who was busy texting with her five-year-old back home.

Annamarie looked up for a second. "I don't know. Maybe someone's husband?"

"I don't think so. He seems to be alone."

"Do you think he's gay? He must be gay. Or divorced. Not worth your trouble."

"I want to talk to him."

Thirty-five days later, David walked through terminal one toward the parking garage where Jessica had told him she would be waiting. She was a little worry wart so she always overestimated how long it would take her to get someplace and thus was always early. For a drive from Kansas City to St. Louis she allotted herself a healthy six hours considering Friday traffic but apparently no one was clogging I-70 in kicking off an early three-day weekend so she breezed to St. Louis and was in the dark parking garage paying two dollars per half hour to read

from her Bible as she waited for David's arrival. At 1:45, the time David's plane was slated to land, she was quivering with nerves and shoved her Bible into the glove box, fixed her lip gloss, and got out of the car.

David wasn't much for phone conversation and Jessica wasn't much for e-mail and texting, so they'd both compromised over the last month in order to communicate with each other and start forging a long distance, modern pen pal relationship which had led to them now having their first date in St. Louis. David was the first person Jessica had ever texted with and she actually kind of enjoyed it, though her fingers were slow and clunky whenever she tried to punch something into her bare bones flip phone.

"garage 3, level 2, black Altima, white girl with brown hair" is the text David received the second his plane landed and he was allowed to turn on his Blackberry. Jessica seemed fairly humorless when he dealt directly with her, like in person, or in phone conversations, but then she'd fire off a somewhat playful little text and make him completely reconsider her personality.

It wasn't that hard to find Jessica once he'd gotten into the parking garage. There were hardly any cars there and there was only one girl leaning against her trunk. David immediately felt underdressed and foolish. He was never the nattiest dresser, but when he flew he dressed even more minimalist, you might say. On this day, he was merely wearing cargo shorts, a tee-shirt, and flip flops. Meanwhile, Jessica was all dolled up in a flowing sun dress and high heels. She had more freckles than he had recalled. Perhaps she had just worn more makeup at the reunion.

David didn't know whether he was supposed to run toward her with his arms wide, perhaps throw his bags to the ground for a big hug and a kiss—and maybe if he got lucky,

some immediate making out in Jessica's backseat—so instead he just did an ironic half trot toward her, hugging her briefly and planting a smooch on her cheek. She retracted and looked down. She was clearly very shy.

"OK, get in and we'll go to the Marriott."

Despite Annamarie's pleas, Jessica had approached David—she never approached men!—at the reunion. It couldn't be that hard she figured, people her age did stuff like this every day. People her age had already begun doing stuff like this for years if not decades—that's how they were all married and she was still single. Jessica was so inexperienced, though, that she didn't even know what she didn't know. Mainly, that people typically have a "line" when they approach a would-be romantic partner. Jessica, on the other hand, didn't know that people typically had a line, but she did know that she had no idea what to say to David to kick off the conversation. For her whole life she had only talked to people when she had a reason to. To ask them questions and what not. So she asked David a question:

"Is there meat in that salad?"

David looked up and their eyes met. He smiled. She blushed, he was so cute.

"Uh...no, I don't think so. Are you a vegetarian?"

"Sometimes," she had said, being serious, she rarely did eat meat, but David thought she was being witty and laughed hard. He had a nice laugh.

Jessica finished fourth in their class's final GPA standings and landed a nice scholarship to KU in Lawrence. There, she had got caught up...well, caught up in "fun." She had drank and done drugs, but she hadn't drank harder than most girls her age and she hadn't done any "badder" drugs than marijuana or mushrooms or the occasional pills like Ritalin. She started going out every night using the fake ID of a sorority sister

who was had just turned twenty-one and thus could use her real ID finally. Mondays were Ladies Night at Charlie's, Tuesdays Flip Night at the Hungry Hippo, Wednesday coin pitchers at LuLu's, Thursdays were for barhopping downtown, Fridays were Happy Hour at Fat Stan's, Saturdays were for frat parties, and Sundays were Drown Night at the Hawg where for five buckaroos you got to drink draught beer until all the week's kegs were killed and, thus, fresh ones could be put on for Monday. Jessica ended most Sunday nights in the bed of some frat boy. She wasn't a "slut," per se, she really wasn't much different than any of her friends, any of the girls at her college.

Sunday nights back in Tulsa, back when she was in high school, had been her Bible study night. Jessica wasn't super religious or anything back in those days, she just went to Bible study on Sunday night because that's what you did. Just like you went to church on Wednesday night and Sunday mornings. It was only after all that fun had led Jessica to flunk out of college that she began to "re-evaluate" her relationship with God. She moved back home, got a job as a hostess at a nearby Tex-Mex joint and, with no underage bars, or men (er, boys), she had no choice but to no longer have any drinks or sex or fun. But that was fine. She grew disgusted with the girl she had been in her year away at college. She wanted to get back on track. And, she did, eventually enrolling at Oral Roberts and getting a B.S. in accounting.

"And the last time you had sex, if you don't mind me asking?"

On the Monday after the reunion, Jessica had returned to Kansas City and immediately sought out her preacher Mr. Charles. She had told him about her little problem and he had recommended she visit his friend Kyle Loucks, not a preacher, but rather a "spiritual relationship and sex adviser." It even

said that on his business cards, which were die-cut to look like crosses.

"And the last time you had sex, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I heard you, Mr. Loucks. I was just thinking. It was sometime during that year at KU. I haven't had sex since then. I've been a good Christian. I'm saving myself for marriage. I wish I still had my virginity to give my future husband but this is the best I can do."

"Some people would even call you a 'born again virgin.'" He smiled at her. "And why exactly did you feel a need to see me?"

"Because I met a guy on Saturday night. I never meet guys."

"That's great."

"No, it's awful."

"Did you have sex with him?" Mr. Loucks leaned in close and put his hand on Jessica's knee, seeming quite curious with her answer.

"Gosh, no!"

He leaned back.

"But I kind of wanted to."

"That's normal, Jessica. You're a healthy, young, beautiful woman."

Over the next month, Jessica had begun visiting Mr. Loucks more and more often as her long distance relationship with David continued developing more deeply. He sounded dismayed when she told him she was going to St. Louis to have her first date with David.

"Do you trust yourself to spend an entire weekend alone with him in a hotel room?"

"No. Not exactly. That's why I booked us a deluxe room. It's not quite a suite, but there's two queens and a small couch in the room."

David was a little surprised when Jessica opened the door to their hotel room and he saw how big it was. This must have cost her a fortune, he thought. They, of course, weren't in Manhattan, but St. Louis was a fairly legit city and this probably cost quite a bit. I guess with a whole weekend together she figured they might need their space. Fair enough.

The hotel room he'd rented for his return to Tulsa had not been nearly as nice. He'd just found the closest hotel to the dinner club that was hosting the reunion and had booked that, sight unseen. He cared more about proximity than luxury, for his goal had been to pick up a girl at his reunion and escort her across the street to this hotel. One of those, "Wanna come back and see my (hotel) room?" kinda things. He hadn't use that exact line verbatim with Jessica but he had used a similar one that had worked. Worked in that she had returned to his hotel room. Once there, he had moved in for a kiss which she had briefly requited but then she had pushed him away.

"Do you believe in God?"

What a weird question to ask, but he was pretty toasted from all the wine he'd drunk so he didn't realize at the time how weird it was.

"Not at all. I'm an atheist."

That had spooked her and she had, all of the sudden, needed to leave, despite the fact her ride, Annamarie, had already headed back to Kansas City.

"How will you get home?" he wondered.

"I'll take a cab."

"All the way back to Kansas City?!"

He'd ended that night alone masturbating to a \$15.99

hotel pay-per-view, Godless Cum Guzzlers funnily enough, the complete opposite of what Jessica had apparently been.

Jessica hadn't drunk at the reunion because she didn't drink any more. I mean, she did drink sometimes, she wasn't a teetotaler, but she didn't drink frequently and didn't need to drink in social situations. Though she was actually starting to reevaluate things. She had quit drinking socially since her "glory days" in college because she didn't like how it had made her lose control. She liked being in control. Though she had begun to think that maybe micromanaging her own life was a very non-religious thing to do. She'd asked Mr. Loucks about this.

"Aren't I, like, going against God by trying to be so in control of myself? Wouldn't it be more religious, more Christian, more Godly, to turn myself over to him?"

"Ideally, yes."

She hadn't further inquired whether drinking a few glasses of wine to turn herself over to him was also legitimate.

"Would you like a drink, David?"

She sat on the edge of the bed and he sat on the couch in the hotel room.

"I'd love one."

Jessica had sat quietly for the first thirty minutes they'd been inside the Marriott room. David liked to talk, considered himself a great conversationalist, but he was no monologist. He flashed back to the night of the reunion and realized he had done most of the talking then too. He'd been loaded, of course, though, so it had been much easier. Since Jessica had done no talking, he really hadn't learned anything about her. Other than that she was hot. That's all he needed to know as he just wanted to have a one-night stand with her. No one ever says, "Oh, baby, you should have seen this chick I picked up and banged last night..."

"Oh, yeah? Hot?"

"No. Smart."

But then, after Jessica hadn't hooked up with him that night and left him all alone in his eighty-nine dollar hotel room, thwarting his overall reunion strategy, he'd returned to Manhattan somewhat vexed. Somewhat intrigued by this Jessica. She didn't do Facebook or stuff like that, and he had no e-mail information for her, so he was forced to call her up at work, as she'd given him a business card earlier in the evening.

When she picked up the phone at 1:00 PM that next Monday, David too hadn't thought of what he was going to say.

"Blaylock Accounting, this is Jessica."

"Hey!"

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Hey?"

"It's, uh, your former classmate. David."

"..."

"David Weiner."

"Yes, I recall."

"So...?"

"Why are you calling?"

"I was just, uh, curious how much your cab ride back to Kansas City cost."

"Why? So you can make fun of me?"

"No, it's not that. I was just..."

"\$225. Without tip."

David started cracking up before composing himself.

"Dinner's on me next time!"

"Next time?"

And their long distance relationship had begun. David



enjoyed talking with Jessica on a daily basis. She wasn't like the girls he dealt with in New York, on the east coast. She was so earnest and honest and kind. She didn't worry about being cool, she didn't gossip, she wasn't materialistic, she wasn't slutty; she was just a nice, smart girl.

Jessica, too, enjoyed talking to David. Sure, he didn't believe in God, or "The Word," but he was so full of life. All the men she met in Kansas City always seemed down in the dumps, beaten down by life, fattened up on BBQ. While David had such grandiose dreams. Dreams of becoming a big entrepreneur and conquering New York City. Like some movie character! She got vicarious thrills hearing about his life there. She knew she could have never handled being a New Yorker, but she liked hearing about his life. She wanted to know more about him and after a few weeks she knew they had to meet. Again.

David didn't know whether they had to meet. Again. But he did know that his month back in New York since the reunion had remained sexless and that now he was well over the eight month mark in sexlessness. After having had literally hundreds of partners for most of the early 2000s, right before he'd committed monogamously to Jenn. It was time to end his longest slump ever. Even if it cost him a plane flight and a summer weekend he could have been at the shore. He, of course, told none of his New York friends where he was going that weekend, nor what he was doing.

Jessica bent down and unzipped her suitcase. David admired her ass. She was in incredible shape. Not just incredible shape for a woman her age. Not just incredible shape for a Midwestern gal. Or compared to the rest of the women from his hometown. But, flat out, incredible shape. Most girls that are,

say, a “7 out of 10” in Tulsa would be no better than a 4 or a 5 in New York, but Jessica was a “10” in Tulsa and would probable be the same in New York, though her over-reliance on make-up, bright colors, and high heels would have distinguished her from New York women.

The Texaco hadn’t had much of a selection to choose from. One usually goes to a highway gas station to grab some Cheetos or a Slim Jim, the kind of shit one would never eat in their normal life. The kind of shit one only thinks a good idea to gnaw on when they’re in the midst of a road trip. White trash trucker food, you know. They’d had several coolers of canned beer, of course, nothing fancy, Natty Light, Beast Ice, Steel Reserve. And, behind the checkout gal’s head were tiny airplane size bottles of vodka, gin, and Jack. Jessica knew she really shouldn’t drink booze. She didn’t want to lose herself that much, and beer, of course, made her too gassy and bloated. Plus, what would David have thought of her if she’d arrived to pick him up with a cardboard case of Coors tallboys? Luckily, the mart did have a few bottles of Yellowtail wine. 2010. A strong year for mass produced wine, Jessica thought to herself. She grabbed a bottle of chardonnay and merlot.

She felt so nervous. She went to the bathroom and grabbed the two glasses. Not exactly classy but she hadn’t felt classy ever since she’d met David. She’d read once that hotel rooms were festering with germs. Everyone knew the comforters were covered with...well, Jessica didn’t even want to think about it! No one used the comforters. But, apparently, the second dirtiest things in hotel rooms were the glassware. She used scalding hot water to rinse them.

“Red or white?”

David looked up as Jessica emerged from the bathroom carrying the two glasses and two bottles of wine. He didn’t

particularly like wine and he hated Yellowtail. It was a general rule of thumb that all wine with animals on the bottle sucked. One of his snobbier foodie friends had once told him that. He hated the acidity of red wine, but didn't want to look like a sissy for ordering white.

"Whichever bottle you want to open I'm cool with."

Oh, great, he's just a lush, thought Jessica.

He stood and walked over as she tried to uncork the chardonnay. He put his hand on her back and she jump startled. She moved a few feet away.

"Please don't touch me yet."

"OK."

She smiled softly at him.

"Cheers."

They clinked glasses.

"I'm in your hands now," Jessica said as she looked upward.

They begun drinking and watching television. There was nothing on so they just left the channel on the Game Show Network. Jessica noted that she didn't really watch TV.

After the first glass of wine, David tried to sit on the bed next to Jessica. She jumped up and moved to the sofa. She cracked her knuckles hard. When she was sexually frustrated she always cracked her knuckles, she couldn't help it. And, considering she was frequently sexually frustrated, her knuckles got quite the workout.

After the second glass, David was starting to feel good and he grabbed her as she walked to the bathroom, trying to pull her in for a hug.

After the third glass, Jessica spoke for the first time in a half hour.

"I'm not saying I do, but it's possible I might like you."

After the fourth glass, David tried to kiss her. She

looked at him deeply in the eyes, almost staring through him.

"Believe me, you would greatly regret having sex with me. I would become too emotionally attached."

Jessica's memory went to shit once she started drinking and she kept repeating herself.

"I'm not saying I do, but it's possible I might like you."

"I know," he amusingly responded.

She really kinda liked David and wanted a life with him. If only he weren't an atheist. After the fifth glass, she finally felt that click.

"Can I have a hug?" David looked at Jessica with puppy dog eyes. He'd long ago developed a strategy where, if a girl didn't want to have sex with him, he just asked for something so pathetically meager comparatively. A lot of guys, a lot of his friends, were like: "Want to have sex? No? OK, then how 'bout a blow job? No? OK, then how 'bout you jerk me off? No? OK, then how 'bout..." But David immediately went to the ground floor. Who would deny him a hug? No one. And he'd start building from there.

Jessica looked at him. "Is a hug all you want?"

"Sure."

"Then come over to me."

He walked over and she opened her arms. He fell into them. She grabbed his face and begun aggressively kissing him. She kissed like she hadn't ever kissed any one before. Licking his teeth and jamming her tongue into his face. But he kind of enjoyed it. It had been so unexpected.

Unexpected to Jessica, too. Not that it had happened, just how it had happened. She was almost able to exist outside her body, looking down at her kissing David, thinking to herself, "Wait...how did I find myself in this mess?"

Wait, how did I get naked?

Wait, how did he get naked?

Wait, how did I get on top of him?

She quit kissing him for a second and looked him in the eyes, seriously.

"Will you go to church with me on Sunday? There's one next door to this hotel."

She was loaded and somewhat slurring.

"Sure. I'd love to."

She smiled and pulled David's boxer briefs down. He reached into his luggage and grabbed a condom, putting it on.

She climbed on top of him and just before she impaled herself, again looked David in the eye.

"DO NOT discuss this with anyone. Not even ME tomorrow."

# Gross Humans

Greenwich Village

She called him Sweets and he called her...well, he didn't have a term of endearment for her. Yet. She insisted he have one by the end of the weekend. But she was only messing around. Kinda. Oh, he already had plenty of nicknames for her but they were more like...well, terms of deridement. Sorta. Playful nicknames, of course, used to flirt with the woman he loved in the same childish way little boys and girls flirted with each other back on the jungle gym. So, he called her his Little Horn Dog and Nasty Girl and Sweaty Betty. She liked those nicknames but pretended like she didn't. Called them his "garbage" nicknames for her. That was why she insisted he come up with a legitimate term of endearment before the end of the weekend.

Of course he loved her, he just didn't love terms of endearment. When was the last time a new one had been invented? Sweets, her term for him, was pretty good, and fairly original, though it was really just a shortening of one of the more notable terms available in Sweetheart. Sweetheart, Sweetie, Honey, Pumpkin, Muffin, Sugar, Sugarpie, Baby, Baby doll, Darlin', Dear. They all referenced something precious or, better yet, sweet. Which, he supposed, made Sweets the quintessential one. Sweets were bad for you but he was good for her she always said.

They had been dating for a mere three months and spent the majority of every weekend in bed. Leaving the apartment seemed like such a chore. They rarely saw each other on weekday nights because both had such demanding careers. Her, the chief of staff for a congressman. Him, a script doctor for the film industry. She always got off work “early” on Fridays which was really just the normal time normal people got off work so he always made sure to wake up extra early on Fridays to assure he had his week’s work finished before 5:00. He’d cross town over to her apartment in the Village, timing it so as to meet her right at the front door to her high rise as she walked up from the nearby ACE subway stop. They’d hug and kiss, she’d say, “Let me just go upstairs and get these gross clothes off. Then, we’ll do something. ‘K?’” But they never “did” something. Who was she kidding?

He’d watch some Seinfeld syndicated reruns on her tiny tube TV on the bureau while sitting on the edge of her bed as she freshened up in her bathroom—her built-in-1882 office building had no AC—calling out to him, asking him about his day. Then she’d come out and sit on his lap, kiss him, rub his neck, and stroke his hair, laugh at Kramer’s antics (she hadn’t watched Seinfeld when it had originally aired), and discuss the potentials for their evening.

“So, what do you want to do?”

“We could go to happy hour.”

“Yeah, that might be fun.”

“I could take you out to dinner.”

“That might be nice.”

But there was no enthusiasm in his offers, even less in her replies.

Soon enough, he would undress her from her “fresh” clothes and they’d have sex and the weekend would officially be under way.

"I don't feel like going out any more. Is that OK, Sweets?" she'd say as they cuddled sweaty in bed.

"Of course it is, you Little Horn Dog."

She'd playfully slap him on his chest. She'd grab her Macbook off the floor and pull up delivery menus while he walked naked to the kitchen to uncork a bottle of wine or uncap some beers. They'd sit in bed, sit in the same spots they'd just laid in having sex, the sheets still crumpled and moist, the pillow top all out of whack, eating their Thai or Indian food, spilling specks of coconut milk or curry sauce in the same places their bodies had already spilt specks of come and vaginal secretions, grabbing the wine glasses or beers from their respective nightstands, squinting to watch terrible Friday night programming, usually reality shows about fat people try to get less fat.

They'd inevitably have sex two to three more times that night, as many more times as she could self-lubricate without fear of an impending UTI, before both of them would be so worn out they'd collapse. They usually fell asleep somewhere between ten and eleven on Fridays, she apologizing to him for being too tired to go out and do anything. He didn't care. He loved staying in with her. It was the best thing in the world to him.

One Saturday morning, a few weeks into their relationship, after they'd just had sex but before they'd eaten his cheesy scrambled eggs in bed—the only home-cooked food they'd have on a typical weekend, assuming a shared tub of hummus or bag of chips didn't count as "home-cooked"—they were reading the NY Times online and stumbled upon an article about how to keep a relationship "fresh." She snickered at the headline, but he insisted she click on the link, which was, at the time, the NY Times' 3rd "most e-mailed article."



Briefly, the article mentioned that couples should enjoy lots of unique “shared experiences.” That sure sounded bunk to him. Sounded like the reality television series *The Bachelor*, or better put, *The Bachelorette*, where a bunch of lame dorks tried to impress the eponymous female star of the show by taking her on fun and exciting “shared experiences.” So, they’d go bungee jumping, paragliding, rock climbing, they’d ride a helicopter around Manhattan isle, have a picnic on top of the Empire State Building, traipse around the Met after hours. Shared experiences, sure, but they just seemed really boring. Shared boredom. And, it never made the bachelorette fall in love with the guys, at least twenty-four of the twenty-five of them, but usually all twenty-five of them when all was said and done. Because that was the thing, these weren’t unique experiences, they were trite cookie cutter experiences that were what was thought to be romantic merely based on our society’s shared experience of years of watching romantic comedy movies and whatnot. Most people were just boring stereotypes with bad ideas, he thought. But he was a true original. That was one reason he was so vexed that he couldn’t come up with an original term of endearment for her. But at least he had original date ideas. Those being to do absolutely nothing. No one did absolutely nothing any more.

They both always joked that because they were interesting people they didn’t have to do interesting things. Boring couples had to go to dinners, wine bars, the movies and theater, but she and Sweets only needed a bed and themselves. They both enjoyed nothing more than gabbing with each other then groping at each other. Enjoying each other mentally then physically. Talking then fucking. Eating then shitting. Farting, burping, sneezing. Being nothing more than pure, raw humans.

On Sundays, she’d get up before him because she liked to watch *Meet the Press*, perhaps the only scheduled event of their

weekends. He was bored by the world, especially politics and politicians so he woke up as the show was wrapping up and then she'd discuss the world and he'd nod and then they'd have sex. She couldn't just fall into having sex with him. That was how men did it, she said, not women. She needed him to talk with her for a little bit, to "emotionally connect" with her she said. Then, after a few minutes or maybe as much as an hour, she said her body would again realize, "I love this guy" and ache for him inside of her. He always ached to be inside of her. He'd never felt that way before.

He was always famished after they finished sex. Like absolutely starving. That kind of voracious hunger you got only after some hardcore exercising. She knew that literally within ten minutes after him coming and them finishing he'd start complaining about his appetite. She even joked that she should get a mini-fridge in her bedroom stocked with some of his favorite snacks to tide him over until they could order some more delivery. He recalled loving back in his college dorm days being able to just lean over the corner of his cot, reach into his mini-fridge and grab a string cheese or a frozen Twix bar or even a cold can of How to Fail Ale. He wished she wasn't joking about the idea because he could have really gone for it.

For her birthday a few weeks earlier, her best friend Lori had gotten her a picnic basket, one of those high-end "sophisticated" baskets. An outer willow construction with a soft corduroy lined interior with specific places already neatly filled like some metrosexual's dopp kit with a corkscrew, crystal wine glasses, sturdy utensils including a cheese knife, a cutting board, porcelain plates, salt and pepper shakers, cloth napkins, an insulated cooler bag, and even a fleece blanket with pillows. Presumably, Lori got it as a nice "couples" gift, something they could drag to Central Park's Great Lawn for a little romantic outing, a unique shared experience, but on the cab ride home from the bar,

they just joked about stocking it with the necessities and keeping it under the bed for his sex hunger emergencies.

When he walked naked from bedroom to kitchen for post-coital snacks like he did yet again on this late Sunday afternoon, he wondered if the luxury highrise across the avenue from her building was full of luxurious people staring at him, people who had watched them just fuck. They never closed the blinds in either her room or the living room because, like, who cares, right? True, she was a kinda important person, a KIP serving under a VIP, but even if some maniac was watching them with a telescope or telephoto lens, they assumed no scandal would ever occur.

They didn't get titillated by putting on a show for potential strangers, too focused were they on each other and only each other, but if someone else's life was so fucking boring that they needed a show between two semi-inshape early-thirtysomethings to excite them, then so be it. All they would see was approximately sixty straight hour of gross humans. Gross humans that spent fifty-eight of the sixty hours prone in bed, four of those fifty-eight having sex, twenty-six sleeping, five napping, the rest talking, watching TV, eating, reading, existing. They'd see a couple that rarely showered during the entirety of those sixty hours, only stood to get stuff in the kitchen, only put on clothes (bathrobes and they alternated) to greet the Guatemalan or Ecuadorian delivery men to pick up and sign for their countless deliveries, only sat to shit out their typical Saturday "grease-fest" as they called it, usually a not-quite-still-hot smorgasbord of mozzarella sticks, chicken fingers, sweet potato fries, and sliders from The Finnegan's Wake pub down the street. These strangers would see two people that talked and talked and talked—but you would never be able to tell about what—and laughed and laughed and laughed—but you would assume they were laughing about stuff that was only funny to them. And it probably was.

He laughed. It occurred to him that maybe another couples' exciting "shared experience" was watching them all weekend.

Another productive weekend, he thought as they showered together on Monday morning, him feeling the slight atrophy of his legs from a weekend of only using them for stability during missionary intercourse.

"I had the greatest weekend," she said as he loofaed her back. She always said that. And he always replied:

"Really?!" like he was kinda shocked. He, too, had had the greatest weekend, sure, but he was always shocked that he'd actually met a girl who likewise considered just being to make for the greatest of weekends. That's why she was his special lady.

He explained all this to her as they walked to the subway to head back into the real world of jobs and decorum, further explaining that was why his term of endearment for her would now forever be:

Special Lady.

# Ain't Nothing Like A New York Romance

Chelsea, Times Square

The bar is packed. All bars are packed on Saturday night in this town. You slide through the crowd, the major douchebags and awesome frat boys and super cool Duke grads, the uglies and fatties and the skanks. Try to get one of the bartenders' attentions but she's so smoking every guy wants to flirt with her, he's too busy trying to run some poor schmo's demagnetized Visa card.

You find yourself stationed next to a group of sexy girls trying to get drinks, too, likewise having no luck. They say chivalry is dead, and they're right, especially in New York, especially when shit's crowded. You're too thirsty and soberish to cede your spot to these girls even if they are cute, even if you haven't been laid in a while. Nevertheless, you start chatting one of them up. She tells you her name, you forget it. You tell her yours, she mishears it as "Gary." You don't correct her, it probably won't matter. You briefly flirt over your shared hatred for the majority of humans in the bar. She laughs when you tell her you really want to smash your beer bottle over that one guy's skull.

Eventually the female bartender looks at you and “Yes?” You look at your new friend, feigning embarrassment. “Go ahead,” you say, feigning chivalry. “No, you were first, Gary” she says, feigning demureness. You offer to order first, but also to pick hers up, too, in a consolidated order. Just makes sense. Not because you’re a gentleman but rather because you think it may escalate the process of her getting drunk and the prospect of one-night-standing you. It better, her fucking G & T cost eleven dollars which you, again, feign chivalrously having no problem with footing the bill on.

You wake up the next day alone in your the twin bed in your tiny studio, fully clothed, your shoes still on. A wicked hangover, the only noun a non-Massachusettian can add “wicked” to without sounding like an annoying Massachusettian. By noon, your hangover has lost the wickedness a bit and you’ve finally gotten the gusto to order some breakfast delivery. You reach for your wallet to get your credit card info to pay for your western omelet. You’re distressed to find it gone. You must have forgotten to tab out last night. All your cash is gone, too. There’s also a cocktail napkin with “Jane” and an e-mail address on it. Highlights flash through your head of your previous night with “Jane.” A lot of drinking, a lot of flirting, a few drinks inadvertently spilled on her jeans, your attempts at a one-night stand casually rebuffed. But she must have liked your somewhat. That, or she gets bored at work and likes receiving e-mails. Then again, we all do.

You sleep and masturbate away the rest of your Sunday, fantasizing a tad about this Jane who you barely know, barely remember. You wish she’d written her last name down so you could search her out on Facebook, look at her photos, masturbate to them. That would almost have been as good as a one-night stand.

When you get to the office on Monday, you get a cup of coffee then shoot off a quick e-mail to Jane, an e-mail you'd been composing in your head for the last twenty-four hours. She responds six hours and twenty-five minutes later. You respond to her response four hours and eighteen minutes later. By Wednesday, your response times have both crept under an hour each. You agree to meet Thursday at a bar. You always set up first dates at bars for reasons fourfold:

1. Dinners at restaurants are awkward.
2. Dinners at restaurants are expensive.
3. Sitting side-by-side at a bar is intimate.
4. Both of you will have no choice but to get loaded.

You always set up first dates on weeknights for reasons onefold:

1. With the inevitable "Have to work tomorrow" excuse looming, you will only have to be impressive for an hour or two, whereas on a weekend date you might have to impress for hours, til the wee hours of the morning even.

You set the date for 8:00 PM which only gives you enough time to sprint home from work and change from your dress slacks into your good jeans. You don't shower. You wish you had time to shower, though, with the muggy August heat, it doesn't really matter as you start sweating almost the instant you get outside in the air. You debate between the best transportation to the bar. You stupidly picked a place in that "in between" zone of thirty to forty blocks. A little too far to walk, though you could certainly do it, you're in fine shape. A little too decadent to take a cab. And if you take the subway, though it would be quick, only two express stops, if the train is slow in coming to station, you'll sweat your fucking ass off on the

sweltering platform. You role the dice, wanting to save potential cab fare for later, and take the subway.

You walk into the bar dripping wet to find her already sitting down drinking a cocktail and chatting with a guy more handsome than you, better dressed than you, and less sweaty than you. You stand beside their conversation for awhile before she finally notices you. "Hey!"

The date goes well. With each drink you loosen up more. Its so loud in the bar you can barely hear each other talk. The music sucks. The crowd is full of guys with scruffy facial hair and vintage t-shirts. You decide to leave and look for a better place to drink. Soon you are a pub crawl without a pub, headed up town, looking for any bar without a rainbow window decal on it. She's sobering up so jokingly, but not really, you suggest buying tallboys of beer at the bodega, brown bagging them, and sucking them down as you stroll. She amazingly agrees.

You have your first kiss on the corner of 42nd and 9th. A tourist family that has clearly gone the wrong direction in trying to find the rest of Times Square walks by you, their M&M Store bags and Bubba Gump leftovers bumping into you. The M11 bus zooms by blowing her skirt up ala Marilyn and getting black exhaust all over the back of your neck. The cripples and old people on the bus drool as they stare at her thong which is briefly exposed. A street kid zips by on his skateboard. "Fuck that ass, yo." His friends laugh. A cop yells at them "ta get off da fuckin' road."

"Your place or mine?" you offer.

She demurs but eventually agrees.

You quickly debate the pros and cons of each.

Your location is better than hers (West Village).

Her location is closer (Gramercy).



She says her roommate sucks.

You have no roommate.

You also live in a studio.

She shares a bathroom.

You can only fit a discarded twin bed you found on the street corner in said studio.

She has a pillow top king she just got at Sleepy's for only \$399.

You have some beer in the fridge and a respectable liquor cabinet.

All that really matters is that she lives closer and the cab you hail is heading east.

You're glad you saved some cab fare at the start of the night. You estimate, with traffic at this hour, that the fare will be twelve dollars and take twelve minutes.

"Don't go through Times Square, you moron!" you yell through the divider.

"It'll just give us more time," she notes with either a sexy or besotted (or both) look on her face.

You advance to second base in the back of Hamesh Kav-El's cab. The smells of curry, cheap incense, and Armor All acting like aphrodisiacal oils and fragrances, arousing you. The cab hits a pothole while you're deep in her mouth and she accidentally bites your tongue. On Broadway, the Naked Cowboy causes a swell of tourists to block your cab's progression. A pedicab with some fatsos from Iowa nearly hits you. Some yokel from Ohio taps on the rear window, ruining the ambiance. Some Eurotrash in capri pants—both the women and the men in the group—point.

At her building, you lug up four flights of stairs as the elevator is broken. She unlocks the door and a Great Dane dives at your knees, barking loudly, shedding hair all over your shirt.

“Sparky. My roommate’s.”

She explains her roommate goes to bed early so you’ll have to be quiet. That’s fine, you’re not much in the mood to do loud things. Talking, watching television, the like. She pours you a glass of red wine in the only cup she has clean—a plastic freebie from Yankee Stadium. In her room she finds Pandora on her iPhone and sets it on her nightstand. A Radiohead song plays but her WiFi keeps cutting out due to a weak signal so the song often skips. She turns off the halogen light and starts undressing. You tell her you’re hot and ask if she can turn on the AC. It’s rattles loudly and drips rhythmically. She undresses you and you both get into bed and resume kissing. She reaches in your underwear and grabs your sweaty dick. You squeal.

“Remember, nothing too loud. Melissa gets up at 5:00 AM.”

She positions herself underneath you, reaching into the drawer of her nightstand and grabbing an MTA condom that was given away free at subway stations during “Safe Sex” week in New York back in March. When you roll the condom on, you can tell why it was free. It pinches and is dry.

You get into missionary position and slide into her. Slowly and not too aggressively so it doesn’t rock the bed, slam the headboard against the shared wall and wake Melissa. Every time you pull back your hips for a big, powerful thrust, she clenches up, acting like a “governor” on a semi truck, forcing you to go back to the tiny quiet thrusts. You both breathe out your nose so as to not moan too loudly. It’s almost painful. You come weakly and roll off her. Out of breath. Breathing heavy. She covers your mouth.

“That was great.”

“Shhhhh.”

The next date you decide to have a proper date, a meal

at a restaurant. At your favorite Thai spot you're wedged into a tiny wobbly table in between two other couples. Your elbows nearly collide with a graying law partner on your right, a Jewish television producer on your left. She hangs her purse on the back of her chair and it nearly collides with the purse of a wannabe model on her right. The purse of a second trophy wife on her left collides with her chair. You have to eat with your elbows tucked in tightly like a Cuban cigar roller. You can't discuss anything that interesting because you don't want the couples sitting nearly in your lap to hear. To surmise you're only on a second date, don't even know each other's middle names yet.

The couple on your right has clearly gotten over this fear, have clearly been married awhile. They loudly bitch about work. The couple on the left loudly bitches about their kids and neighbors and their currently leaking house in the Hamptons. You feel squashed, like you're sitting in the cheap seats at Fenway, you can't wait to finish your meal and move to standing room only.

The air is cool and you decide to walk back to her place. You pass other couples on the street doing the same. You ask if she wants to get an ice cream and she says, "Let's share a cone." A bum spits at you. Another harangues you for some money. "You got enough coin to get that ugly thing an ice cream, but you can't help a poor fella out?" The fudge ripple at Tasti-D tastes very chemical like. At least it's no-fat.

Saturday you go to the Park. You lay a blanket out on uneven grass with tree roots creeping up underneath, hurting your back. The sun burns down on you. You wish you had a swimming pool. You wish you lived in the suburbs with a grill. You pay five bucks for a steamed street hot dog, four for a bottled water. Other couples surround you on their blankets. Hippies play frisbee, their

misthrown discs nearly guillotining you as you rub your lady's sweaty and street-grimey feet. Little brats cry, shrill in your ears. Cigarette smoke floods your nostrils.

You decide to go chill out at the movies. Pay thirteen for a ticket times two. Another fifteen for candy and sodas. At least the AC is nice. You watch a romantic comedy about a couple falling in love in New York. It's hacky and clearly shot in Los Angeles. Maybe Toronto. It does well at the box office. It stars that Australian guy whose name you always forget.

You exit the theater and night has fallen. The skyline is lit up. The Empire State Building is purple for some reason. You grab your new girlfriend's hand, tell her you love her. You look around and think:

There really is no better place to fall in love.

# The Cheat Sheet

Upper East Side

Things had been going great between her and Aaron. They'd been dating for six months and had yet to have a single fight. And it's not like they avoided things just to not "rock the boat"—oh, no—they certainly weren't one of those couples.

They had deep discussions, long talks about anything and everything. Both encouraged it. They were old enough—thirty-one and thirty respectively—to have learned that the key to a successful relationship was communication. One couldn't let feelings fester. Both Aaron and Stephanie constantly related with each other how they were feeling at any given time within the relationship.

Aaron had just finished writing a short story collection. Stephanie begged him to let her read it. Stephanie liked to read but wasn't much of a reader any more. Too busy with running demographics numbers for a major cable television network. Aaron's day job was as a bartender. He'd been trying for years to break into the screenwriting world until he

eventually gave up and decided to revisit prose, his first love. He knew short story collections weren't lucrative, weren't even that viable as potential book properties in the year 2010, but he wanted to write one any ways, just for pure artistic joy.

Stephanie's mom often criticized her for dating a bartender but Stephanie insisted Aaron was "more than that." She thought he would soon be a huge writing success.

"Have you ever read anything he's written?" pointedly wondered the divorced Ms. Sadler.

Stephanie hadn't, but that was, of course, because until then, Aaron had only written screenplays and "normal" people didn't read screenplays Aaron told her. They were hard to understand format-wise and not that enjoyable either if you weren't used to reading them. But, now that Aaron actually had some prose, Stephanie definitely wanted to read it and see how talented her terrific boyfriend truly was.

She read the first story in the collection and was shocked. It was creepy if not scary story about people that pretended to be certain people. What did she really know about Aaron's friends? She'd obviously met a few of them, but never for anything more than a few drinks out every so often. Conversation was never that personal during those nights. Everyone just talked about the beer and sports and reality TV. She wasn't even Facebook friends with any one of them!

She was confused, shaking, though she didn't say anything to Aaron. Why didn't he ever talk about his parents, she wondered? She made a note to ask him about that later, but for the time being she just asked to see the next story in his collection.

"Wow, so did you like that first one?"

"It was...interesting for sure."

The second story was also...interesting, it painting women her age as deceitful and flighty. Essentially putting the blame on her gender for all the failures that occur within the world of New York dating. That hardly seemed fair. Especially because the male in the story was such a freaking dope!

The third story was even worse—was this what Aaron thought about women?! What a misogynist! She was the same age of thirty as the story's protagonist, some annoying chick that Aaron made out to be a whiny, bratty, pathetic loser. Was that what he thought of her?! Did he think she was a loser because she was likewise a thirty-year-old unmarried woman? Was he just using her for sex or something?!

"You know nothing about women!" she yelled at him.

"Whoa, slow down, Steph. It was my first attempt to write something from a woman's point of view."

"Well, you failed!"

"Tough critic. But thanks. I appreciate the honesty." He got out his notepad and jotted something down.

Stephanie already didn't want to continue reading his garbage, but she couldn't help herself. It was torture, yet she couldn't stop. Why was she doing this to herself?

The next story was just blatantly offensive, like he was trying to make her upset. It made her both never want to be married nor certainly never have kids. Especially with her secret perv of a boyfriend. Did all men really sit at home all night dissatisfied with their partners and their sex lives? Was Aaron—currently in bed next to her watching Oedipus Rex on Fox, 7.2 share—really just fantasizing about going to the bathroom to masturbate while he thought about another,

sexier woman? Did he think about hookers? Gosh, had he ever gotten one before?!

She put the laptop down on the floor and rolled over on top of Aaron, pulled his boxer briefs down and took his penis in her mouth. He was startled.

“Hey! Oh! Guess you really liked that...story!”

After he came and immediately conked out for the night, Stephanie regretted blowing him. Especially after reading his next story and getting to delve a little more into his mind. He was flat-out mocking feminists in this one. And she considered herself a feminist. So, he was mocking her!

Her disgusting boyfriend had created yet another perverted character, more obsessed with nasty sex than with anything else. This guy was immoral, though, using his position of power to just...well, to just hypnotize sweet little girls into being his sex slave! Under the guise of helping them. He made the one female authority figure in the story a real bitch, too. A real c-word. Stephanie was starting to realize that Aaron had a problem with women in positions of power. Did he secretly hate her for having such an important, well-paying job? Was that why he always wanted doggy style sex—to try and assert some dominance over her? Was he using his position of power—LOL—as the man in control of the beer and the booze, to take advantage of drunk young women? Those stupid college girls from NYU who came into Standing Room Only every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday to drink their faces off. How could she be so dumb? She was now certain Aaron sometimes closed up the bar then followed one of those NYU sluts back to her dorm room for a late night hook-up. She could barely handle being in bed next to him as he slept. Such a pig!



Stephanie took her laptop to the living room to read another of Aaron's stories, though she really didn't want to. Now she was just reading them to learn more about this man she thought she knew. To unravel the mystery a little bit more.

The next story mocked romantic comedies in a totally pretentious, superior way. It was clearly taking a shot at her again. Like most women her age, she loved those kinds of movies: *Pretty Woman*, *You've Got Mail*, and *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* were some of her favorites. Like most men his age, Aaron hated those movies. She didn't exactly know what kinds of movies Aaron liked, but she now assumed they included a lot of tits, ass, sex, explosions, fights, and scatological humor. He must have written this story because he was clearly still mad she'd dragged him to *Cheeseburgers in Paradise*, a delightful new Kate Hudson/Gerard Butler movie, a few weeks ago, on a "date night," and was now using his pen to lash out back at her. Fine, she'd never go to a movie again with Aaron.

The next story was even worse as it was totally mocking her dear friend Lisa who just last week had gotten engaged. Aaron had been trying to watch the NBA Finals between two teams he didn't even care about when she'd received the call from her excited best friend. He must have been annoyed to have to hear one end of a conversation about another person's over-abundant happiness. Tough!

The next story felt like a punch to her gut. It was like she was reading—forced to read—about some previous sexcapade her man had had. And with such a stupid girl it seemed! How pathetic! Had he really flown halfway across the country—twice!—just to try and get a little action?! And

from a born again Christian Midwestern hick weirdo, no less?

Was this what Aaron had been doing "back home" when he'd flown away for a weekend just a few weeks into their relationship? Why, it was like he had just admitted to cheating on her. Did he think she was stupid? Like she couldn't put two and two together?

She needed a drink she was so upset. She walked to the kitchen and took one of Aaron's fancy beers he was saving for a special occasion, popped the cap, and started chugging it straight from the bottle. Serves him right, she thought. The cheater.

As she drunkenly paced the living room, reading from her laptop which she cradled in one arm, she coincidentally read a story that took place almost entirely in bed. And it was clearly based on her bed, her small apartment. In the previous stories it had seemed he was only mocking situations of their life together, but in this story, it seemed clear he was mocking her.

Same with the next story which was pretty much a companion piece. If he thought their life together was so boring, so predictable, so non-romantic, then why was he even dating her?

She thought long and hard about it all.

If he was so unhappy, why was he with her?

It hit her!

He was just dating her to help his writing. To give him ideas.

She stumbled into the bedroom and shook him awake.

"Wha'? Wha' is it?" He looked at the cable box.  
"It's 4:00 AM."

"You're disgusting!"

"Huh?"

He'd gone from sweet dreaming to getting shouted at by a girlfriend he'd never once seen even slightly perturbed. Her breath smelled like beer, too. When had she gotten drunk? He was so confused.

"You're filthy! F-word this and c-word that. All you think about is sex. Sex with school girls and born again Christians and stupid sluts and...and, and everyone! Are you tricking me? Is this all a trick? Why are you using me? Do I not satisfy you? Do I not make you happy? Do you hate being in New York and dating me? Do you want more romance...?"

She went on and on until she eventually broke up with him that very night.

As of today, no publishers had accepted Aaron's short story collection.

To clear his mind, he decided to write a story about the craziest girl he'd ever dated.



Aaron Goldfarb is the author of the novel *How to Fail: The Self-Hurt Guide*, the world's first self-hurt guide. He has written screenplays and stageplays, most notably *The Honey Trap*. He lives in New York. *The Cheat Sheet* is his first short story collection.

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