

EXCERPTS FROM

THE BITCH IS BACK



OLDER, WISER, AND (GETTING) HAPPIER

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...and more

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The Coming of Age

Sex 102

SARAH CRICHTON

As my marriage of thirty-odd years was exploding in a spectacular fashion, I said to my therapist, “Well, one good thing is going to come of this. I’m going to have a sex life again.”

I hadn’t planned on saying this. I’m not sure I was conscious of even having thought it. But out it came. “You know why?” I said.

“Because you like sex,” he said.

“Yes.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” says my friend Mary. “I am so sick of aging women who boast about how much they still like sex.”

Believe me, I am not boasting. But when you did enjoy something (like a sex life) and someone (like your husband) took it away from you (when? only the assiduous journal keepers among us ever record the final fuck), you do have a hankering to get it back in your life.

Let’s paint this picture: You are no spring chicken. In fact, you are in spitting distance of sixty. Over the years, your husband has taken to accepting work that takes him farther and farther from home, and longer and longer to complete, until one day he just doesn’t come back. “Sweets,” he writes, “got to see a man in Bratislava. Wi-Fi spotty; will try to Skype soon.” He never does.

The man in Bratislava turns out to be a Czech boutique owner in her thirties. But let’s get back to me.

My world collapses. But in short order I get something extraordinary: a handsome widower who is ready to be happy again. He

will woo me with flirty e-mails and surprisingly thoughtful gifts. He will call me his “sweet angel,” but of course he’s not the only one being saved. And there will be sex. I want to say a lot of it, but then my teenage self looks down on me with a cocked brow. Okay, fine: There will be *plenty* of sex.

But before there can be sex, there are—there must be—The Preparations for Sex.

Beyond the Myth of Co-Parenting

What We Lost—and Gained—
by Abandoning Equality

HOPE EDELMAN

Not long ago I spoke with a friend I'd lost touch with nearly twenty years ago. He was going through a terrible divorce, uncovering lies, betrayal, infidelity, all of it. "What do you think makes a marriage work?" he asked, partly of me, partly of himself.

I was, I told him, probably the wrong person to ask. "Mine has survived, I think"—my words tumbled out quickly, before I had a chance to censor them—"because we spend so much time apart."

I could tell how odd this sounded to someone who hadn't seen me in two decades, who'd known me as a chronic people person. How to explain that what once felt like loneliness now feels like a blessed independence? That too much togetherness might feel claustrophobic to me now?

I held my hands parallel, palms touching. "We began like this," I said, and as I moved my hands forward, I separated them. "And then we went like this for a while and then like this," and I brought my palms back together and moved them apart, together, apart. In these motions I saw the nights my husband and I had both lain awake with a squalling infant; the separate vacations we've taken; all the birthdays and Thanksgivings celebrated as a family at the house; the past twelve summers I've spent in Iowa with the girls;

the occasional mornings we both work from home instead of from our offices just to share the same space for a while; and the evenings and weekends when I see him, if at all, only in profile as he stares at his laptop screen. As much time apart as together. Never would I have expected to have this kind of marriage. Never would I have expected it could come to fit me so well.

Without a doubt, my husband's steady work ethic has provided for our family for nearly two decades. I've been a beneficiary of his success—hardly a victim. But unlike other couples I know, we haven't watched all of *Breaking Bad* or *House of Cards* together, and we don't have a favorite bar we frequent or a vacation destination we escape to together every year. I have my favorite activities and places that feed my soul, and he has his. Sometimes I wonder whether we're missing out, whether true companionship might have been, or might still be, attainable with another person. Yet on other days I love that we still make each other laugh every morning, truly *every morning*, despite our differences, when so many couples around us haven't survived nearly this long. And on these days, I wonder if a partnership that becomes less about two spouses' ideas about equality and romance and even companionship, and more about raising two content, productive, well-adjusted citizens of the world together is, despite occasional frustration and loneliness, a mostly ideal arrangement when children are involved—or as ideal as many couples can hope to get.

Living Alone: A Fantasy

SANDRA TSING LOH

Sandra, before you rush to move in with Charlie?” warned my therapist, Ruth, shaking her cloud of silver-gray hair, her geometric earrings. “To find out who you really are? You should spend at least six months living alone.”

Ruth had been my husband’s and my couples therapist for over a decade. For ten years before that, she was our friend and neighbor. She’d been around for our wedding, the purchase of two homes (the second one, next door to our first, was hers), and the births of our daughters, now six and eight. Ruth was as close to a tribal elder as I might ever hope to have.

And yet, I felt—I *knew*—in that moment that my sensible, Jewish sixtysomething maiden aunt therapist was dead wrong. Or perhaps she was just giving lip service to a nice idea, like how dentists say to floss or doctors to drink eight glasses of water a day. I should live alone for six months—right! I’d rise early, meditate, drink green tea, journal! Surely after six months of calm reflection, as with a waiting period to buy an automatic weapon, I would come to my senses and go back to my marriage with Ben—or at least, that was her poorly hidden implication.

But that wasn’t going to happen. My love for this other man, Charlie, was a runaway train. At forty-six, I had found my soul mate—something I’d not thought was even possible. True, the details didn’t look that great on paper, just yet. Charlie and I were both still married to other people, both of us with school-age chil-

dren. We had started an affair four months earlier at, okay, Burning Man (but it wasn't how you think!). We had continued it in hotel rooms with liberal amounts of vodka, pot, and cigarettes while I was on book tour promoting a memoir about, um, parenting. Over the weekend before the aforementioned therapy session, our spouses had found out and they'd kicked us to the curb, our shoes, socks, and wrinkled clothing thrown into the proverbial twist-tied garbage bags.

So yes, it wasn't the cleanest start. But we were trying to fix things, beginning, in my case, with this emergency shrink appointment on this wintry January afternoon. Charlie and I had discussed bringing in a therapist anyway, possibly a team of them, to help our families manage this . . . this "domestic transition." But sitting now in Ruth's familiar den, sunlight slanting across Balinese masks on faded tangerine walls, I realized she wasn't going to help. Clearly, she thought I had lost my mind. Clearly, she thought I was destroying my family. To her, Charlie was an interloper, a louche cheating husband sent from central casting whom she barely gave a second glance.

Six months of my living alone would solve this crisis? How little she knew. Because however messy our beginning, this was no passing Facebook fling. Charlie and I had been business partners—he managed my theater productions (I perform comedic monologues, both onstage and on radio)—for ten years. Over this same decade, when our spouses were traveling for work (often), we had been each other's social escorts. We had gone on the road together. We split small plates of hummus and calamari in restaurants. We were best friends. After confessing that our outwardly successful marriages were inwardly emotionally barren, we had realized that *we* were the couple who made sense. Our finally living together now, then, would be a party—but not in hotel rooms. Because I had enough money, it would be in our own wonderful shared new home. And,

organically, all the other details would fall into place.

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And how did that all work out for you? one might ask.

Fifty Shades of Free

ROBIN RINALDI

When I was three years old, I stood on the back porch one summer afternoon ignoring my mother's repeated attempts to get me inside so we could go to the store. I could see and hear her through the door, which was part screen, part glass. Finally she picked up her purse from the kitchen table, turned, and said, "Okay, I'm leaving, see you later." My mouth opened in shock and rage. And as surely as if she had flipped a lever controlling my arm, I smashed my fist through the glass.

When I was four, my extended family lined up for a Christmas Day photo at my aunt's house. I was next to my cousin, just a year older; against my right shoulder, her fat arm stuck out of her velvet Christmas dress. Before I could stop myself—and to the gasps and horror of everyone—I turned and dug my teeth into it.

By the time I was five, though, the combination of kindergarten, Monday-afternoon catechism, and my father's temper had me on the inevitable and necessary track to socialization. Decades later, some people will backpack or scale mountains to remember who they really are. Some dive to the blackest ocean depths or don boxing gloves or parachute into thin air. I found a different way. But it took me a long time, and no little amount of soul-searching and heartbreak, to get there.

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In my mid-twenties, I lived on the ground floor of a gingerbread

Victorian on a leafy street in Sacramento, California. I had broken up with a perfectly decent boyfriend for the simple fact that I felt too dependent on him and thought I “should” experience living alone. I was always doing things like that: checking myself from getting too content or lazy, watching my actions as if from above. I diligently put away part of each paycheck, took the boring lucrative job instead of the creative lower-paying one, obediently spilled my guts to a therapist each week about my father’s violent outbursts and my mother’s terrifying panic attacks amid the backdrop of my tiny Catholic hometown, scribbling her suggestions and homework into notebook upon notebook.

My neighbor in Sacramento was a woman about my age, but completely different: skinny, with long dark hair parted in the middle and an incessant rotation of *The Cure* blaring from her open bay windows down into my basement-level ones. (*The Cure* was not my thing. I had skipped straight over post-punk to the much tamer world-music forays of Paul Simon and Peter Gabriel.) Her boyfriend was skinny too, a drummer, and heavily tattooed long before ink was all the rage. They were always screaming or smashing things or screwing, and when they screwed, she made the most horrible sound: a swallowed, rhythmic bleat signaling either erotic pleasure or slow death by butcher knife. Often, each utterance was presaged by the hard thwack of what could only be the drummer’s open hand. The summer heat was suffocating, and with no air-conditioning I was loath to shut my windows, but even when I did, I’d often still hear the dulled echoes of his palm landing, her vocal cords convulsing, all of it building to a crescendo of muffled moans and shrieks. Afterward, I’d stomp through the house slamming windows back open, feeling a strange mix of anger and fear.

My eventual next boyfriend was, of course, nothing like the drummer. No tattoos, no screaming. He did have longish hair, and

he did partake in the occasional dose of recreational drugs, but his job and bank account were as stable as mine. Raised in the Midwest in a happy family, he was quiet and generous both in life and in bed, where the love ran deep and the passion was sensed more than expressed. He offered the calm, stable presence I'd never known in childhood, a counterbalance to my own recurrent panic attacks and my general sense of the world as too big and threatening to ever feel safe.

The deal was, when we needed to suss out the status of our bond, I would break down and he would offer a silent, sturdy shoulder to cry on. As sweet as our sex life was, collapsing into him provided a connection that often ran even deeper than sex. Our energies mingled. I'd emerge from a good cry feeling I had taken him in, his clothes wet with my tears. The rest of the time, for us, it was work and leisure, home and abroad, all in moderation. It functioned so well that we married.

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But sometime around age thirty-nine, I started to feel much less afraid. My career was stable, and I had a chunk of money in the bank. I'd been through enough therapy to have dumped a good portion of childhood shame and more or less forgiven my parents. Lying awake in the middle of the night, I'd watch from my side of the bed the outline of my husband's broad shoulders rising and falling as he slept. We'd never, not once, had sex in the wee hours. When I'd asked him recently if he wanted to try watching porn together or maybe give anal sex a go, he'd said, "Not really." I bought a blindfold, but after five minutes, he took it off me. I had told him, in passing, how there were so many dirty things I wanted to say during sex. But when it actually came time to say them, I couldn't. Not a one.

He did try to accommodate. Once, while we were changing po-

sitions, he unexpectedly slapped my ass. My jaw dropped and I almost laughed, but then I thought better of it. Laughing would break the mood and bring us back into our safe harbor, and the whole point of a safe harbor is to occasionally venture out onto the high seas, no? But I couldn't help smiling, and then he smiled, and our moment of dark erotic play dissolved.

If I grew too strong, what would glue us, since so much of our love centered around my messy dependence on his cool strength? At first I thought: *It's his turn to lean on me. Come on, I can take it.* But that is not how my midwestern husband was built. He was grain fed and skyward looking. He didn't need to lean. So then I thought: *Okay, big guy, get bigger. Expand the container around me to fit this larger self I'm growing into. Show me you can handle the woman as well as the girl.* That's where the blindfold came in. But it wasn't really working.

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Around the same time my urge to be blindfolded sprang up, I developed a latent and intense maternal longing. For me, it was more than just the innocent dream of nurturing a child. I also wanted a baby to—among other things—align the infinite potentialities of each day into a path I didn't have to think about anymore. Forty years of thinking were enough for me. I was ready for a mental break consisting of breast milk and spit-up and shit, warm baths and onesies and the smell of Johnson's Baby Lotion. I longed to go on autopilot, if only for a year or two: exhaust the body, overload the survival instinct, focus on someone else for a change. Not to mention extinguish all the dirty words backing up in my throat, threatening mutiny. My husband's progeny would weigh down my belly, then my arms, and anchor me in place.

But my husband wasn't on board for fatherhood, and after a pregnancy scare—devastating to each of us for different reasons—he

got a vasectomy and sure enough, the mutineers overturned the ship. I asked for—and received, if reluctantly—permission to open up our marriage for a year, and over the next twelve months, I went wild: moved out of our house for part of each week, placed an ad on Nerve.com for casual lovers, joined groups of sexual explorers whose mission was to better understand the female anatomy. All of that is a separate story. The germane bit here is that many of the men I took to bed turned out to be dirty talkers, ass slappers, firm hair pullers who liked giving orders. At the end of each encounter, my limbs vibrated with the aftershocks of human collision—both thrill and satiation.

The sex didn't always make me orgasm, but I didn't care about that; I could do that alone. What I couldn't do alone was order myself around, take such elegant control of myself—or when I did, it was always to do boring things like going to the gym or meeting constant deadlines. The rewards of daily submission to the elliptical machine or attending my Excel spreadsheet were so long-term as to seem invisible, whereas the rewards of submitting to a lover's faux discipline were immediate. It was playful, erotic, a great way to let down the hair after twelve hours at the office—but more substantially, it began to rearrange my outlook on power.

Five Crucial Things the Fifty-Three-Year-Old Bitch Knows That the Thirty-Nine-Year-Old Bitch Didn't (Yet)

PAM HOUSTON

Three: I don't care what men think of me anymore.

This is the most surprising and most drastic change of all, and my sudden lack of interest in what a man, in what *any* man, thinks of me is such a profound and complete change from earlier in my life that I have to believe it is hormonally assisted.

For so much more of my life than I would care to admit, I thought I might die if some man or another didn't love me. Sometimes I was able to make them love me, and sometimes I failed to, and I'm a little chagrined to admit there are men on both of those lists whose names I could not recall right now with a gun to my head. I know I felt that way at one time because I have written books that are the records of those feelings. I have paid therapists and healers of all kinds thousands of dollars to help me cope with those feelings. But what not one of those people ever said to me is "Just hang in there, Pam, and make it to the other side of fifty, and those feelings will turn off like a switch."

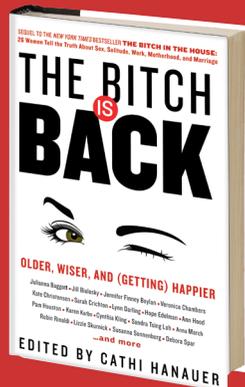
The first question is why I needed these men to love me in the first place. The answer can only be one cliché or another. Because my father didn't? Because that is how the species perpetuates itself? Because I drank from the cultural Kool-Aid bottle that equates landing a man with winning some kind of prize? Even my mother, who was in as oppressive and soul killing a marriage as I know of, was very invested in my hair being parted on the side, in my wearing tummy-flattening underwear and shoulder pads (for crying out loud) so no one would see the real girl underneath. My mother had so many face-lifts that by the end of her life she couldn't close her eyes. I wouldn't have cosmetic surgery if I won it in a raffle and it came with a free two-week trip to the Bahamas. A woman is told in a million different ways that if she finds herself alone at middle age it means she is unlovable, unattractive, unappealing, unsexy. But what if it means she is independent, self-entertaining, free-spirited, and self-possessed?

The second question is, Where did all those desperate longings go? Down the dark disappearing rivers of estrogen and progesterone? Or did the life lessons accumulate to some critical mass where it finally sank in that men, by and large, demand more care and attention and daily propping up than dogs, and only the very best of them give a dog's worth of love back? Or is it the fact that I have been in a stable and sustaining long-distance relationship with a loyal and good-hearted man for eight years? Greg comes to Colorado in the summer and I teach one quarter a year in California, and we meet for a U2 concert in L.A. or a hiking weekend in Utah or countless other places his work or my work take us that we think we can turn into fun. He is a wonderful dog dad and I love his daughter very much and we are excellent at giving each other space.

Do I care what *Greg* thinks of me, you might be wondering, and I do, but I don't care *more* about what he thinks of me than about

what other people of either sex that I admire/like/love think of me or than what I think of myself. What I am trying to say is that the caring has lost its obsessive, stick-a-knife-in-your-thigh-to-stop-the-pain quality. I spent years acting and not acting a million particular ways because I thought it was what a man wanted from me. Worse even than that was when I dimmed myself down from 100 watts to 60 because that was all they could take. When I think back on it, I can only shake my head in wonder. First I can't believe I did it. Then I can't believe how well I know that I will never do it again.

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