

My Life with Michael

A Novel of Sex, Beer
and Middle Age

LORI L. SCHAFER

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DEDICATION

To Michael – my unwitting, unwilling inspiration.

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CHAPTER 1

I was thirty-nine years old when I first met Michael. At the time, I was happily cohabitating with my boyfriend of the past four years. Oh, we had our problems, of course, but not many, and for the most part, we were well contented with each other. We had no intention of ever getting married, and neither of us wanted children, so you might say that we were as committed as we were going to get. Nonetheless, by this time I was fairly convinced that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, and I'm comfortable saying that he felt the same way about me.

Everyone said we were a terrific couple. They were right. We were both very busy with work and our own projects, so we didn't always spend a lot of time together, but we really enjoyed each other's company when we did. I couldn't have counted the number of late nights we stayed up just talking, or the number of groggy mornings I spent wishing that we didn't always seem to find so many new things to talk about. He was an excellent companion, definitely not someone you'd get sick of in a hurry, and even though we never travelled or really did anything more exciting than sharing a beer at a local pub, I loved being with him. And I had definitely reached a stage in my life in which I was more interested in companionship than sex. Not that sex was a problem – in fact, he was a swell fucker – but I could safely envision still wanting to be with him even if that changed. Although I'd never been in a relationship that had lasted this long before, I assumed that eventually bedtime would become routine and monotonous, just as asking and hearing about the other person's day must ultimately lose its power to enchant.

But as I'd moved through my late thirties, I'd stopped worrying so much about whether our sex life would remain novel and exciting because, frankly, my own drive seemed to be diminishing slightly with each passing year. I still needed frequent fucking, but the strength of my desire for it had lessened, and I didn't always want to make a big production out of it, if you know what I mean. It was similar to the way I felt about breakfast. When I was single, I rarely bothered eating breakfast. Now I cooked breakfast for us every day, and I usually made a bigger fuss over it than was strictly necessary, because I figured if I was going to go to the trouble of fixing food, I might as well make something I really wanted to eat. Yet some days, preparing a

three-course meal and washing pots and pans seemed like more hassle than it was worth, when boring old cold cereal would fill us up equally as well as eggs and potatoes. And sometimes I'd even forget for a little while how much more satisfying it was to have a big fancy morning meal until something or someone prompted me into that recollection and I'd remember how awesome bacon made the house smell or how much I enjoyed the confluence of flavors in Eggs Benedict. I only hoped that the day would never come in which I decided to skip breakfast entirely because I'd rather stay in bed and sleep late.

But if that day was lumbering on some far-distant horizon, it hadn't arrived yet, and in the meantime, there was Tom, and that guy wasn't only sexy, he was gorgeous. He wasn't the chiseled, clothes-model type, nor the handsome, dreamy sort, either; he was more like that cute boy who lived next door when you were a teenager who you secretly hoped was watching when you undressed in front of the window, but who you knew never would because he wasn't that kind. He had a real, down-home boyish kind of charm that was practically irresistible, and I never could understand why he wasn't constantly crawling with women, although I suspected it had something to do with the jealous old lady on his arm. Even had he not been beautiful, I would have found him appealing because he was exactly my type, and I mean, exactly, as in, if I were describing my ideal man he would have fit the bill without having to shift a molecule. He had slightly wavy brown hair that he wore a little long, warm brown eyes, and a modest beard and mustache that he never quite managed to keep trimmed. I loved the soft scruffy bristles he grew between shaves, and never tired of rubbing his cheeks. He wore glasses. I've yet to meet the man who was not more attractive to me with glasses than without them. He had a great build, too. A couple of inches shy of six feet, just the right height for smooching, and muscular; once when I'd sprained my ankle out on the front sidewalk, he'd carried me in his arms up the stairs and into the house as if I were a child. Yet he was soft in the belly, which is where I like men to be soft. He had a wonderful deep voice, and a great hearty laugh, and huge smile lines radiating outward from his eyes in a purely adorable and not an old, wrinkled kind of way. Nothing about him struck you as old. There was not one gray hair in that man's head, and I should know; I searched frequently and enviously through every lock and never found one. He was only three years younger than me, but could and did pass for much less. I never told him this, but I harbored a secret fear that one day we'd be out together and someone would mistake me for his mother!

Not that I was so bad to look at either. I'd always been cute more than pretty, and that doesn't come off so well when you get older, but I didn't think I'd gotten a bad deal all around. I had fair skin that was just beginning to get blotchy, unimpressive brown hair that I wore short and plain because it looked even worse long and styled, and rather lovely green eyes that were becoming less lovely as the skin around them sagged and puckered. My mother had been the same way. She used to forewarn me that one day I'd be sorry my face was shaped like hers; that I would grow to despise those pouches and dark circles, and boy, was she right. I wasn't sure whether I should be grateful or regretful that I had no daughter to inherit this precious family trait.

I was surprisingly satisfied with my body, however. I'd always liked my height; at five foot six, I was neither too short nor too tall, and I had a large frame that could carry quite a few extra pounds with some success. Although I'd never been particularly heavy, I'd always had to monitor my weight closely to keep it under control, and when I'd moved in with Tom, the additional meals and sharp increase in beer intake rapidly robbed me of dominion over it. I put on twenty pounds in two months, so fast that I didn't even have time to shop for fat clothes. It took almost two years, but somehow through rigorous exercise and severe alcohol restrictions, I lost the twenty pounds I'd gained and another twenty besides, and for the first time in my life I could actually be described as thin. People did, in fact, refer to me that way, usually with unmistakable envy. But naturally I never understood that, because I still couldn't see anything but the bulges. I'd be willing to bet you could walk up to the skinniest woman in any room and ask her how she felt about her figure, and she'd find an inch to pinch somewhere and tell you she wished she was ten pounds lighter. Anyway, the one saving grace of my aging body was that I finally had a rather nice figure, except for my thighs and butt, which were both disproportionately large, and my breasts, which were decidedly not. That last was the one thing I missed about my old body. Although I wasn't well-endowed even at my heaviest, I'd at least had respectable boobs. Now, even on my considerably smaller frame, they seemed depressingly tiny. Of course, I wasn't sure how much of that was because they had shrunk, and how much because they were simply spreading out over a larger area. In fact, I grew less annoyed by my wee breasts as I approached middle age and gravity began exacting its vengeance on me for defying it by spending so much time upright. I took some small comfort in the assurance that my boobs could never possibly reach my waist, no matter how hard they tried.

Michael, on the other hand, was not at all the kind of guy I would ordinarily have perceived as attractive. In fact, he was almost the opposite of everything I find physically appealing in a man. He had coppery-red hair, which I have never particularly cared for, pale, almost icy blue eyes, and a foot-long beard that I always thought was just ridiculous. This narrowly pointed monstrosity grew almost down to his chest, like a goatee run hideously amuck; a chin-decoration that would have sent even its four-legged namesake scurrying for shame into solitary abandon, but which Michael seemed to wear with pride, stroking it often as if for ideas or luck. I've never understood that about brewers; they all seem to be walking around with piles of crazy facial hair. If you don't believe me, take a look at the faces surrounding you the next time you're at a beer festival and you'll see what I mean. I've often wondered if they incorporate that into some bizarre secret handshake or something. Anyway, he certainly was not a man I would have spotted from across a room and thought, Oh, I want a piece of that! Up close he did have a pretty nice body, though, rather to my taste. Not quite as tall as Tom, and definitely a little rounder. I can still picture that growing beer belly stretching out his T-shirt, and my eyes helplessly watching my own hands reaching out to rub it, without even asking my brain for permission.

But nothing could have been further from my mind than the idea of changing partners on that first unexpected evening when Michael came do-si-do-ing into my life.

“You gotta come see this, Tom!” A largish, nondescript fellow in a navy brewer’s shirt was tugging impatiently on my boyfriend’s arm. I’d never been able to keep track of all of Tom’s many friends, but I was pretty sure he was one of them.

Tom looked at me inquiringly. I shrugged. “I’ll be right back,” he promised, pecking my cheek and following his buddy down a long steel staircase into the hidden depths of the brewery. I stood awkwardly holding my taster cup, trying to pretend that I was perfectly at home in a room full of strangers and desperately seeking anyone with whom I could fake making intelligent or even somewhat lame conversation.

I should have just tagged along like I usually do, I thought irritably as the seconds stretched into minutes, clutching at my beer as though it were a crutch, and leaning as awkwardly against the wall as if I really had broken something. You weren’t invited, I reminded myself, wishing that I could remember Tom’s friend’s name so I could curse it properly.

I’m sure old what’s-his-face didn’t mean it personally, I admonished myself, returning to the tasting-room bar to top off my glass, my last sample having mysteriously evaporated more rapidly than usual. He was only an assistant brewer, and evidently a new one at that; probably didn’t want to be seen traipsing through the private rooms with an entourage. And you couldn’t blame Tom for wanting to go and see whatever the secret treasure was, either. Beer is a big deal where we live, and Tom was unquestionably even more passionate about it than most; he’d often expressed curiosity about what went on behind the scenes.

But, but being a wise and understanding man, he’d never deserted me like this before, and as the minutes passed and people continued to stroll by me, half-smiling in alcohol’s comfortable glow, I became more anxious to find someone, anyone to talk to; something to look at besides the tiny cylindrical glass I kept emptying for lack of anything else to do.

And that was when I spotted him. Also alone; also staring at his beer as if debating whether to strike up a conversation with it before someone came along and rudely interrupted. Although I was never very good with faces, I was fairly certain I’d seen this guy around. In addition to being regulars on what you might call the “festival circuit,” Tom and I often also made the rounds of the local breweries, most of which, like this one, had tasting rooms where you could sample the new varieties as well as the old favorites. Likely he was a regular, too. It wasn’t much of an opening, but I snatched at it like a hound-dog after supper’s last bone.

I marched. I was never very subtle. Walked right over and stood close beside him until he turned to look at me, perhaps slightly surprised to find a not-unattractive if no-longer-young woman at his elbow, sipping a beer and not offering the slightest pretense of nonchalance.

“I think I’ve seen you around,” I said bluntly.

“I think I’ve seen you around, too,” he answered, his lips twitching slightly as if uncertain whether they ought to surrender to a smile.

Now if you’re a young person, you may be astonished by the boldness of my approach, because if a young woman walked randomly up to some male stranger and struck up a conversation, he’d likely interpret that as a signal, one utterly

inappropriate for someone who is happily attached. But when you get to be thirty-nine, you don't worry about that anymore. One, because you're no longer hot and you can't make the assumption that almost any man you meet is going to want to sleep with you if you merely look at him cross-eyed. And two, because if he's roughly your age, as this man was, then both you and he know that at least one of you is bound to be married. In other words, it suddenly becomes possible to be friendly to a member of the opposite sex without it being misconstrued as meaning anything more than that, which is certainly not the case among younger people. It's the one teeny consolation you get for no longer being perceived as a sex object.

"How's your beer?" I inquired, infusing the question with as much sincerity of interest as I could muster. It was one of the few phrases in my very limited array of conversation-sparking techniques that was guaranteed to generate an enthusiastic response among members of the beer crowd, and I wasn't too proud to latch onto it if it kept me from having to talk.

I can't transcribe the answer he gave me, but it sounded very technical; too technical for someone who was not a devotee to attempt to understand. I listened closely to the lecture on fermentation temperatures, but gave up trying when he reached the part about the fruity esters.

"Uh-huh," I answered, nodding my head as if I'd written the book on fruity esters and looking around to see if there was another novice I could talk to instead.

"How's yours?" he asked, nudging my attention back to him.

"Yummy!" I said with conviction. "Must be them fruity whatchamacallits."

He laughed good-naturedly. "That's a stout."

"For your information, Mister whatever-your-name is," I replied with assumed haughtiness, "It's a blend. Unlike you obvious laypersons, we true connoisseurs aren't afraid to mix!"

He laughed again, his eye-wrinkles crinkling in a manner that reminded me of my own.

"Actually, esters or no esters, I really like the beers here," I confided, deciding to give Mr. Expert another chance. At least he had a sense of humor; was less of a beer snob than some others I had met.

"So what's your favorite?" he replied, warming to a subject that was clearly close to his heart.

I told him, and then noticed that I'd polished off my two ounces of beer again. It sure went fast in those tiny cups.

"Your beer's empty," he said, frowning as if I'd been downgraded to critical condition while the doctor was out taking a smoke break. "Here, I'll get you a new one."

Had I still been a young woman, naturally I would have interpreted this gracious act of kindness as an attempt on the part of this man I'd just met to get me drunk in the hopes of having his filthy bar-guy way with me. But being closer to the mature side of life, it was only my innate sense of feminist independence that was offended.

"I'll get it," I objected as he magically transferred my taster cup from my hand to his in one deft, seamless motion, as if he'd had a lot of experience with manipulating glassware. But then I saw that he had ducked the line and was stepping

behind the bar to fill my glass with my designated favorite.

"Thanks," I said, clinking my cup against his and taking a small sip. "Do you work here or are you just really obnoxious?"

"Guilty on both counts," he answered, grinning. "Actually, that's my beer you're drinking. All of us worked on it together, course," he clarified. "But it was basically my recipe."

"Nice job!" I said, taking another sip and scrutinizing my new acquaintance with greater respect.

"Glad you think so. My wife says it had better be good for all the extra hours I put into making it."

"Married, huh?" Told ya. "Any kids?" I inquired politely.

"Three."

"Holy cow!" I was always a little stunned to learn of the existence of other people's offspring, especially when it came to people my own age. In my mind, I still thought of grownups as creatures from my parents' generation.

He chuckled, evidently unoffended by my consternation. "You?"

"Nope, no children. That I know of," I qualified. He tilted an eyebrow at me and I knew my little joke had fallen flat. No one understood my sense of humor, I fretted with a sigh. "Uh, no husband, either," I hurriedly continued, by way of dispelling the awkwardness.

"That you know of?" he smirked.

"Right," I agreed. "Although I did go to Vegas last year, so I suppose it's possible. Of course, my boyfriend probably would have noticed if I had married a lion-tamer or something while we were down there. Seems like he would have mentioned it."

"Probably just being polite," he contended. "Doesn't want to embarrass you over not remembering. Besides," he continued, leaning in closer and whispering conspiratorially, "It's not wise to mess with the wife of a lion-tamer. They're very ferocious in defending their territory."

"And how exactly did you become such an expert on lion-tamers?" I queried bemusedly.

"Family tradition," he shot back without hesitation. "My father was terribly disappointed that I was unable to carry on our generations-old trade."

"Just couldn't keep the lions tame, huh?"

"On the contrary. I made them too tame. The audience got bored watching them just sitting and purring; rolling over with their legs in the air until I rubbed their bellies. One even insisted on brushing his teeth – and flossing – before I put my head in his mouth!"

"Thank you, thank you," he said, bowing as I dissolved into a fit of giggles. "May I refill your beer, Miss...?"

"Kate," I answered. "Yes, please, Mr...?"

"Michael."

"Ah! One of my favorite names," I said, oddly pleased with the moniker although for some unfathomable reason it didn't quite seem to fit the man.

"Really?" he inquired curiously, cupping my empty glass in his palm. "How

come?”

“No idea,” I shrugged. “Maybe because I’ve never known anyone irritating by that name.”

“There’s still time!” he reassured me seriously, vanishing again behind the bar and reemerging a moment later with two beers and an amiable smile.

And we were off. It turned out we actually had quite a few things in common, me and this heretofore unknown brewer-man. He was three years older than me and, like me, had attended a private university and started down the path to becoming an engineer before shifting into an entirely different career. He’d also moved around quite a bit like I had, and it was refreshing to have a conversation with someone who hadn’t been born in the area and lived there his whole life, like practically everyone else I knew. Maybe it was only because we did have so many things in common, but I found him easy to talk to; not once did I sense my brain struggling to come up with what I was going to say next, as it normally spent so much of its time doing in social situations. Anyway, we chatted about this and that and I don’t remember what all for probably a whole hour before Tom finally reappeared.

“I am so sorry!” he declared penitently, bursting free of the milling crowd and landing with an audible plop at my feet. “Dave gave me the whole tour; he wouldn’t stop showing me... Hey, aren’t you a brewer here?” he exclaimed, suddenly noticing my companion.

I introduced them.

“Really nice to meet you,” Tom said, in that friendly but not phony way he had with new acquaintances. “I wish I’d brought that beer with me,” he added wistfully. “I’m a homebrewer,” he explained in response to Michael’s questioning look. “A new one; this is only my second batch. You could probably tell me what’s wrong with it.”

It was too bad, really; the first batch had turned out amazing, I thought, but the second had a powerful off-flavor and an odd smell, like rotting rubber. Tom had blanched when he’d tasted it and was dispirited and heartbroken for about five minutes, which was about as long as he was ever dispirited or heartbroken.

“This is great!” he’d declared at last. “I’m only going to get better if things go wrong, right?”

Sometimes I envied his optimism and even keel. In my universe both good things and bad happened randomly and without warning, and I was rarely able to maintain the smooth, unruffled calm that he so effortlessly achieved.

“Be happy to,” Michael said encouragingly. “Bring it by some time. I got started as a homebrewer myself. Sometimes the troubleshooting is tough.”

“Thanks!” Tom answered. “I’ll do that. But we should probably get going,” he said, turning back to me. “I quit a while ago but I shouldn’t drink anymore if I’m going to drive.”

“Yeah, sure,” I said. Tom always drove when we went out, so I never argued when he wanted to leave. He was good at knowing when to quit. Driving after drinking made me very nervous, even if I’d only had one beer; I always worried that maybe I was too tipsy to know I was tipsy.

“Well, it was nice talking to you,” Michael said, extending a firm hand for me to

shake.

“Yeah, you, too,” I answered, clasping the proffered handhold gratefully in farewell and following Tom to the door without looking back.

“I didn’t know you knew that guy,” Tom remarked as we were climbing into the car.

“I don’t,” I answered. “I just needed someone to talk to. He looked vaguely familiar, so I went over to him.”

He smiled apologetically. “I really am sorry. I know you’re not comfortable being alone in that kind of situation.”

“Actually, it was fine. Really!” I assured him in answer to his skeptical glance. “Believe it or not, I had a good time.”

I think Tom was as startled as I was to hear me say that, me not being a big fan of chit-chat under the best of circumstances, let alone when I’ve been abandoned in an unfamiliar setting and have no place else to go. In fact, had this happened ten years earlier, when I’d still been painfully shy and reserved, rather than only somewhat so, I probably would have fled the building and started skating the miles across the slippery, icy sidewalks back to our house rather than endure the agony of random discourse with a real live human being. But nowadays my sense of self-consciousness outweighed my shyness; I hated being stared at more than I dreaded making small talk, and trust me, people do stare when you’re standing all by yourself in a crowd. Whether it’s out of pity or scorn doesn’t matter; no one wants to be the subject of either.

“You’re sure you’re not mad at me?” Tom asked as he hopped energetically into bed. He scooted over to my side, wrapped his arm around my shoulder, and pressed his chest close against mine, a very effective method of attracting my attention as well as my forgiveness.

“You’re lucky I had what’s-his-name to keep me amused,” I answered with mock severity. “And to get me beer!”

“I bring you beer all the time!” he objected, withdrawing slightly from my embrace to look me defiantly in the eye.

“I know you do, sweetie,” I conceded, drawing him towards me again. “That’s what I keep you for,” I joked, planting a hoppy kiss on those warm, soft lips and following it up with more until he took the hint and undressed me.

And I didn’t give Michael another thought until the end of April when we ran into one another at the Spring Festival, one of the major events that all of the beer fanatics attended, and my personal favorite. Joyously is not a word I would typically use to describe how I anticipated most of the days of my life, but for that festival, it fits. I looked forward to it for weeks in advance. It was held at this large pub downtown, and although it was tricky, it was possible to get there and back via public transit so that neither Tom nor I had to worry about driving, which was both nice and necessary. Maybe other people were able to attend that festival and drive safely home afterwards, but we were not they. Actually, I always thought that anyone who could wasn’t doing the festival right. There were so many delicious beers to taste that we usually found ourselves hanging on until the bitter end, cleaning up the dregs even as the servers were threatening to wheel the last kegs away, which was

probably a little silly because after the first ten or twenty samples, they all began to taste alike anyway. But it was always a great time, and I liked the pub itself, too; it had a neat design. An enormous shiny wooden bar had been constructed in a rectangle around the center of the main room. Inside the bar, well protected from inebriated patrons, a mass of bartenders resolutely guarded the dozens of kegs they routinely kept on tap, as well as the hundreds of glasses they kept in stock in valiant defense against continual breakage. Apart from the scores of swiveling barstools, numerous small tables were scattered about where you could sit and listen to the local bands that would play on the raised stage opposite the front door. On festival days they lined the walls with kegs, too, so that it was wall-to-wall beer and people for hours on end, but no brawls ever broke out, the participants were always friendly and polite, and by the end of the day even the servers were loaded, but no one, including the bar owners, ever seemed to care. To me it was the grandest event of the whole year, and from the crowd that always turned out for it, it was apparent that I wasn't the only one who thought so.

"Well, hello there!"

I turned. Michael was standing by my elbow, smiling sideways at me and holding out a hand for Tom to shake.

"Nice to see you, Michael!" I said, reeling him into half a hug and smiling back.

"Oh, yeah, I'm really glad you're here!" Tom said eagerly. "See, I've been having this problem with my mash..."

I nodded politely as they launched into their long-awaited discussion of homebrewing techniques. I people-watched while I pretended to listen – I had rapidly grown accustomed to ignoring a lot of beer talk – and every so often I slipped away to fetch a new taster and pretended to listen some more while I sampled it.

"Would you excuse me a minute?" Tom said abruptly, handing me his taster cup. "I gotta visit the Port-A-John."

"Oh, okay," I said. I had that uncomfortable feeling in my gut again, the one I always got when I was left alone to chat it up with someone I didn't know very well.

"I'll be right back," he promised, hurrying towards the exit.

It's only for a few minutes, I thought to myself, glancing out the window at the long bathroom line. Besides, you got along fine the last time, didn't you?

I sighed a little as I watched him go. And then I turned to Michael, feeling squeamish and wondering what to say next.

"So what's your favorite so far?" he said. Was he ever at a loss for words? "I've been so busy chatting I haven't gotten many samples in."

"Well, let's fix that right this minute!" I replied, steering him by the elbow towards the nearest keg, relieved to have something to do.

In no time we were talking and laughing like old friends, and when Tom reappeared, he found us standing side by side with our arms around each other like it was the most natural thing in the world. I am not generally flirtatious, and rarely am I physically affectionate with anyone who is not my boyfriend – in fact, I think it's rude to fondle someone other than the someone you're attached to – but although Tom eyed me a little peculiarly, he didn't comment.

We were ready to leave not long after that, and in a kinder world that might have been the end of it. Except that as we neared the exit, we heard a voice calling out, “Is that you, Tom?”

“Oh, hi!” he shouted back, waving at an older woman sitting on a bench by the door. “That’s a friend of my mom’s,” he said to me, his eyes glassy. “I’ll just go say hello.”

Well, I simply could not face having a mom-friend conversation after what seemed like fifty beers even if it was actually only forty, so I went back inside and found Michael again. He was chatting animatedly with someone else, but I unabashedly poked him on the shoulder, past the point of caring whether it was rude to interrupt.

“I thought you were leaving,” he said, shooting me half a smile that might have meant anything.

“Not until you hug me goodbye again,” I said, throwing my arms wide.

I didn’t mean anything by it – at least, I don’t think I did – but I guess it was a pretty transparent move because he looked at me kindly, and then put his arms around me and squeezed me so tightly I shook.

“Hey, you’re a beautiful girl,” he said, pushing me gently away. “But...” And at that moment, Tom came back and found me so I never got to hear what the “but” was. But as I pulled away from him our eyes met for a second, and maybe I was just loaded, but it felt as if we shared a flash of, I don’t know what you’d call it. Mutual understanding? Well, maybe understanding isn’t the right word, but there was a connection and I felt it even if I couldn’t define it. The image that sprang to my mind was that of a circuit being closed. There’s a snap of wires and suddenly you have electricity where there was none before. It was so well-defined that it was almost physical. It was a look that bound me somehow.

But in the morning I woke uneasy, and as the day wore on and my hangover wore off, I conceded that it wasn’t only the excess of alcohol that was upsetting my stomach. I kept mulling over what had happened, and by early afternoon I was thoroughly disgusted with myself. It was that last comment he’d made that disturbed me most.

“You’re a beautiful girl, but...”

Who could have guessed that an unfinished remark could be so devastating? It so clearly implied that he thought I was coming on to him, which I really wasn’t. Okay, maybe it was conceivable that there was a fleeting attraction there, but it wasn’t as if I intended for anything to come of it. I was a good woman, a fine woman, trustworthy and loyal, and he was merely some dude I’d met once or twice. I loved my Tom, and that made me invulnerable to such frivolous temptations, I was sure. But now I worried, too, with cause, that I had been disrespectful of Tom. I certainly didn’t want his countless friends and acquaintances thinking that his girlfriend went around flirting and making moves on other men. I sure as hell would have been pissed off had it been him instead of me. Plus, this guy was married, for God’s sake, and married men had always been strictly taboo in my reckoning. The end result was, that although technically I hadn’t done anything wrong, the more critically I examined my behavior, the more like a lowlife I felt.

Of course, although I couldn't admit it to myself at the time, I might not have felt quite so rotten about it were it not for the implied rejection. Whether he'd misjudged me or not, I'd still had to swallow his polite, No, thank you, which was a little insulting, even if it was the proper response for a dedicated husband and father of three. Of course, it wasn't logically possible for him to reject me if I wasn't after him, was it? So said the irrational part of my brain, pretending to act rationally and doing a poor job of it. But there may have been a tiny bit of hurt mixed in with my guilt. Maybe it even intensified it slightly. I was almost old, after all. I had no business expecting anybody to give me a second glance, which was all the more reason why I should be thankful that I already had a great boyfriend who still thought I was sexy. So on top of misbehaving, I'd probably made a complete fool of myself flirting with someone who couldn't possibly conceive of little ol' me as an object of desire anyway. By the end of the day, I was so unhappy and ashamed that I resolved to apologize for my behavior and keep a polite distance in future. But there was something about Michael that somehow always managed to unravel my most earnest resolve.