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Madly in love

Three months before my wedding date, I had a debilitating attack of depression.

At the time, I was living in North Pole, Alaska, which had elected Santa Claus to the city council. It was pitch dark in winter. The sun rose in the south and set in the south, shedding less than four hours of golden light on the snowy landscape. Temperatures regularly plummeted to -40F. Inch-thick sheets of ice coated the roads, while smog from coal and motor vehicles choked the dense, stagnant air. It wasn't the wilderness paradise I had envisioned four years earlier when I moved from Mississippi, and each winter had been tougher than the last. But something darker than winter and stranger than North Pole was at work in my mind. Whenever I thought about marriage, a gang of negative emotions emerged within my consciousness, mugged me and whirled me around before I could see their faces.

I was twenty-six, a perfectly eligible age for marriage. My partner Jenn was truly my favorite person in the world. We had been dating more than two years and living together almost as long. Did I simply have cold feet? Or was the damage more severe, like frost-bite?

After finding me sobbing on the floor for the umpteenth time, Jenn convinced me to find a therapist. Until that time, I had never even considered therapy. My father's generation had made a cult of self-reliance, believing that asking for help was a sign of weakness. But with the wedding so close, and my situation desperate, I was willing to take chances.

I didn't know where to start searching. Browsing therapists in the area, I discovered one who styled herself as a marriage expert. She was a member of the Association of Christian Sex Therapists, if you can believe that such a thing exists. Among other steps to recovery, she described "total surrender to God."

I nearly vomited. All the shadows suddenly had faces—and they looked strangely like Jesus.

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I grew up as a fundamentalist Christian. My parents and the whole Bible Belt community conspired to raise me as a "God-fearing" man, which was strangely considered a compliment. I had left the church shortly after moving to Alaska, but not out of any special conviction. I had simply walked out and never returned. I couldn't reconcile my faith

with the life I was beginning to discover through Jenn.

I had given my virginity to Jenn, after a rigorous program of “waiting till marriage,” and keeping “pure” for Jesus. In that moment, and the many succeeding moments, I realized that I really liked sex—and didn’t feel that I should be damned to Hell for expressing that. While Sunday morning found my friends in their pews, praying to a God no one could see, I was still in bed, exploring Jenn’s body as she explored mine.

It was wonderful at first, but as marriage approached, my love for Jenn became a crazed desperation, racked with jealousy, envy and shame. Jenn had explored her romantic and sexual needs with more than a dozen partners. I had only recently learned to masturbate without guilt. I wasn’t even sure I was heterosexual.

And I wasn’t alone. Connecting with other ex-Christians, I felt the scars of religion, deeper than nails on a cross. One blogger summarized it perfectly: “In my late teens and early twenties, I ditched guys I truly loved so that I could remain ‘pure’ for Jesus. Looking back, I was insane. I could have had beautiful relationships, but instead ... Christianity put me in a cage of self-denial and guilt.”

In Christian religion, love is sacrifice and sacrifice is love. St. Paul instructed men, “Love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her.” We Christians are taught to *give ourselves up* for our partners—not just our time, energy, freedom and devotion, but our entire sexual identity. God has highly specific plans for our bodies, and all experimentation is a sin.

The Bible taught me to lock my sexuality in a cage, to starve and beat it whenever it cried for freedom. Specifically, I was taught to “cruccify the flesh with its passions and desires.” My impending marriage began to feel like a final lock on the cage, subjugating my life to the biblical agenda.

With my wedding only three months away, I knew that I had to unlock the cage, befriend the monster and teach it how to be human again. I had to understand how Christianity had warped my thinking, which of my sexual desires were healthy and which were a product of jealousy, anger and desperation. I had to find a healthier spirituality—one without cages. And I had to figure out how to do this without hurting everyone I loved.

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I finally found a therapist who specialized in “religious abuse.” Following a dozen emotional breakdowns in his office, I realized I was not prepared for lifelong monogamy.

“I cringe,” I told my therapist, “when I think of going to my grave having only known one person. What am I supposed to do, just leave Jenn?”

My therapist asked, “What if Jenn said, ‘I never had much religion in my life, and I need to explore myself before marriage. I want to spend a year at an ashram in India. Is that alright with you, Izzy?’”

“I would say, ‘That’s really awesome, you should go for it.’ One year of personal growth in exchange for a lifetime together sounds like a win for everybody.”

“OK then, what about sex?” my therapist asked. “Jenn says, ‘I’ve never had sex with another girl, and I want to do that before I get married.’”

“I would say, ‘That’s really hot! Go with my blessings.’”

“Would you want to watch?”

“Yeah, if she’d let me.”

Much to my chagrin, my therapist seemed to think that was normal. He even asked if I’d consider hiring a prostitute to help me work through this. Given his line of work, I’m sure he could have hooked me up.

Jenn did her best to understand my dilemma. “A part of me almost wants to say, ‘Hey, we’re not married for another three months! Go ahead and get it out of your system,’” she said. “Seriously though, please don’t.”

I had to be realistic about my options. I could call off the wedding, break up with Jenn and see other people—or I could have an affair. Jenn was a wonderful partner. Her family welcomed me as their own. I couldn’t simply tell everyone, “Sorry, I can’t get married because monogamy isn’t my thing.”

Which left Option #2.

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Jenn traveled frequently for work, even in winter. Sometimes she attended conferences in the “Lower 48” states. Or she researched in remote Alaskan villages, accessible only by plane or dogsled. She was gone one weekend—the whole weekend—in February, and I decided to visit the club.

When I say *the* club, I’m being literal. There was only one club in town.

I spent an hour getting ready. Shaved. Put together a nice outfit. Found a small bottle of cologne. I wondered, *People wear plaid to the club, right?*

OK, sort of ready. I didn’t have a plan except *go to the club and see*

what happens. Since I hadn't lost my virginity until twenty-three, you could say flirting wasn't really my strong suit. If a girl started grinding on me, I probably would have recoiled in horror.

I had heard a podcast about a man whose personal goal was to sleep with a different girl every night. He said, "It's easier than most people think. You just have to stay at the bar until 4 AM—and dramatically lower your standards."

You'll just have to stick it out, I told myself as I drove into town.

I'd been to the club once before with some friends. The music hadn't been too loud, drinks were decent, and there was karaoke. I minored in vocal performance in college, so I figured karaoke would be my best chance for romance.

As I drove, arguments played on loop in my head.

What would Jenn say if she knew?

Jenn will never know!

What if I get an STD?

If people backed down because of STDs, no one would ever have sex.

Doesn't this prove I'm not ready to be married?

With luck, I'll be ready after tonight!

Suddenly I saw the lights. I pulled into the parking lot, put on my best game face, and walked to the door, ready for the security team to frisk me.

The door was locked.

Darkness inside. A notice said, "Closed for renovation." *Deus ex machina.*

I went back to the car and did the only thing I could do—laughed at myself. I would have to be faithful after all! Still, the night was young, and I was all dressed up with nowhere to go.

I made a circuit of the downtown area. Everything had closed at 5 PM—except for one place. I had never been inside the Dungeon Superstore, or any adult shop for that matter. So long as I had sex on my brain, why not give it a shot?

Brimming with testosterone, I entered the Dungeon... and immediately felt like I was crashing the wrong party. Questions whirled in my head. *People don't actually use that, do they? Jesus Christ, does this thing go inside you?*

The clerk asked if he could help me find something. I spluttered, "Oh no, sorry, just browsing please thank you, excuse me!"

I hid in a corner with the condoms. At least I wouldn't look weird buying condoms.

Then I saw it, on a rack beneath the silicone vaginas. Five-and-a-half unassuming inches. Smooth and blue, with zero anatomical detail. On sale for twenty-five bucks.

I sheepishly returned to the clerk and purchased my first vibrator. Then I went home and spent a lovely evening watching porn on the couch.

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If I had been deadly serious about cheating on Jenn, of course I would have found an opportunity. If I thought that one small fling would solve my problems, perhaps I might have done it. But I was struggling against a lifetime of repression—a lifetime spent believing that my body belonged to Jesus, and by proxy to the Church.

The name Israel means “he wrestles against God,” and I certainly did! In a fit of depression I told Jenn rather suddenly that I needed to get out of town and clear my head. I called in sick from work and spent two days at the local hot springs, dropping tears into the steaming water.

The insurance company had informed me that they would not cover my therapy sessions, not one cent while I paid \$700 per month for insurance. I didn’t have the money to pay my current tab, so I had been without care for weeks. Fortunately, I met a therapist in the hot springs.

Her name was Rosa. She was a Reiki master from Mexico who had recently opened a practice in the States. Her business had been running only a few weeks when Rosa felt she needed to clear some negative energy. And just like that, she took off for a vacation in Alaska.

I found Rosa deeply attractive, in the spiritual sense. She trained herself to view life objectively, and to slough the onus of guilt instead of begging God’s forgiveness.

We talked about energy healing and the delicious drink they made at the resort bar—hot cocoa and raspberry liqueur. Then I told Rosa I was stuck in a rut with my partner. Marriage was going to crush me, but a break-up would hurt everyone.

“Conflict comes from timing,” Rosa said. “We feel conflict when we want right things to happen at the wrong time. If you’re not ready to be married, that’s that. You want a good thing. It’s not your fault if the timing is wrong.”

“I don’t think my family would understand that idea,” I said.

“Don’t try to understand your family. Love them, but don’t try to understand them. Hopefully they can do the same for you.”

Rosa had an aurora viewing tour scheduled for the evening. It was her last night in town, and the skies had been cloudy all week. I wished her good timing as we parted. Then I returned home to Jenn.

"I'm not ready," I said. "I tried to be ready, but I'm not. I'm not healthy. I need time to heal and fill the holes that have been left in my life."

We talked about my religion, my sexual frustrations, and my insecurities. I couldn't say what emotions Jenn felt in that moment, but it was enough that, months after our wedding day had come and passed, Jenn said, "It hurt, and it still hurts, but I'm really glad you told me the truth."

2

Me

I am tall, over six feet, but it's hard to tell because I slouch. Tall people have to slouch. Public spaces weren't designed for us. Cars, chairs, and tables weren't built for us. We shrink in order to fit. Most of us develop back problems as a result.

My eyes are grey, with splashes of yellow at the center. The yellow is a relatively rare condition, so subtle that few people notice it from a distance.

I have thick, unruly dark hair. With the addition of glasses, I once bore a striking resemblance to Harry Potter. Tired of hearing the comparison, I refuted it by growing a beard.

I have a fair amount of muscle tone, which is unfair to everyone who goes to the gym, because I don't. The other men in my family are into fitness. I guess my looks were just inherited.

My penis curves up when erect. Some men call this a deformity; some women find it perfect for stimulating the G-spot. Myself, I think straight penises look funny.

I have long legs and large feet. I would be good at running except for an issue with my left knee. I nevertheless enjoy frequent walks, but only in natural spaces like forests. The arch of my left foot was destroyed by an accident with a truck in middle school, but it only bothers me when I wear shoes with arch support.

My hands are big, like my feet, and my fingers are long. I am double-jointed, meaning the knuckles of my fingers work independently. It never seemed to offer any practical advantage until the night I lost my virginity.