



## THE CHALLENGE: AIRLINES CHARGE EXTRA FOR BAGGAGE THIS HEAVY

*“The greater the obstacle, the more glory in overcoming it.”*

– MOLIÈRE

*“YOU NEVER INITIATE SEX.”*

My husband Derek is standing in his closet, slipping a powder blue button-up shirt back on its hanger when those four little words leave his lips. It feels like a dagger in the chest — kiss of death. It’s a shot to the heart, and I’m apparently to blame. I thought everything was fine. No, great! Weren’t we having great sex? Wasn’t our sex life great?

“You never initiate sex” falls matter-of-factly out of his mouth, but what I hear is “you’re a failure of a wife,” and I’m ready to dig a ditch and toss my loser limbs into it.

I pipe back. *“What are you talking about? I do too! Just last week, on Wednesday!”*

The problem presents itself to me like a popped tastebud on my tongue as soon as the words leave my lips, but it’s too late to go back now.

## SHIELDS UP.

When I was younger, there was this magical place called “Lazerstar” in our small suburban town that was essentially the Holy Grail for children between the ages of 4-18. Think, laser tag meets arcade, meets snack bar sanctuary with a stale water smell that only comes from an undersized and overused air conditioning unit. Every inch of the place was covered in glow-in-the-dark space-themed wallpaper. The moment you stepped inside, an impressive display of prizes met your gaze. They had Cyclone, car racing, ski ball, and the dump truck game that I frequently made my bitch. Kids would crowd around the Mortal Kombat arcade machine, oohing and aahing and yelling, “Finish him!” as they watched epic battles between Scorpion and Lui Kang. The tickets and nacho cheese were ever-flowing, and every time I stepped inside those galaxy decorated walls, I silently declared that if Heaven didn’t have a Lazerstar, I didn’t want to party in those pearly gates.

The arcade boasted an impressive crowd with its flashing lights and victory bells, but it was a prerequisite for the tantalizing adrenaline rush of laser tag. Like fifteen minutes on the treadmill before a weight lifting session, the arcade served as a warmup before the big event. No amount of bonuses could hold a candle to seeing your hand-picked code name gracing the scoreboard for everyone to see. The focal point of the entire building was two modest black marquees above the laser room entrance, showing real-time scores and rankings for the teams playing inside. The highest scorer of each match received a free game, so the stakes were staggering. We all wanted to see our name in those red neon lights and to experience the surge of pride and glory as we walked through the laser room and back into the arcade among our new, adoring fans.

*Thank you! Yes, I'm smurfitup55, and I know, I know, meeting your hero can be intimidating, but I'm just like everyone else, I promise, but only, with the highest score in the entire building, no big deal!*

You could claim childhood fame in your game record, but like any battle, you still had to work as a team to be triumphant. Upon writing your chosen code name on a tiny slice of paper with a miniature pencil, they separated everyone into one of two sides: The green team and the red team. Each wave of players was broken up into unique missions, and they'd call out on the loudspeaker when it was your turn.

*Mission: Alpha Delta Beta, line up!*

This is where the arcade served its divine purpose. Games were a distraction from the sweaty palms and shaking legs of laser tag anticipation. When your mission was finally called, you'd assemble, about-face on your color-coded side and proceed to size up your competition standing across from you. Fighter stances, sly grins, and seemingly random laughter to cripple self-esteem were highly encouraged during this roll call. After they let you soak in the faces of your enemies in the light, a black door would open, and a part-time teenage employee with attitude would usher everyone into a small room with benches and colorful paint splatter on the walls, illuminated by black-lights. There, the referee (who was also a part-time teenage employee with attitude) would explain the rules and show you how to use your gun/vest combo: No running. No hitting. No drinking the blood of your foes, yada yada yada, before opening a door that led to a large, cold room with rows of green and red laser

tag vests decorating the soft grey walls as far as the eye could see. The vests were heavier than anticipated, with a laser gun attached to a long cord coming smack dab out of the middle, and targets on your shoulders, back, and chest that looked like police car sirens. If you looked directly down on the breastplate, it lit up with your stats, showing you exactly how many points you'd accrued, so you could keep track during the game. The gun kept track of your "ammo" and once it began flashing "0" the gun would stop working until you went back to one of two charging stations to "fill up."

After snapping our vests into place, each team was instructed to follow its assigned color referee to opposite ends of the massive indoor arena. There, a pissed off prepubescent employee would show us how to charge our lasers at the charging stations and send us in one by one to load up before getting on the walkie talkie and signaling "go time." Once everyone on each team was juiced up, an eruption of music fit for Rocky Balboa would fill the room and a voice on the speaker would declare, "GAME ON."

Glow tape acted as a guiding light to find your way around the tall, gym mat pillars within the course. It was steal the flag style; only the flag was these giant cyclone targets on each team's home base. I'm supremely competitive, which is the polite way to say, "I'm not here to play; I'm here to bloody effin' win!" Each game felt like the most significant battle of my life, and I had a complete strategy in place on how to get the most points and see my name at the tippy top of those black marquees. Most people spent their time shooting the opposite team, but that's because they were damn fools who didn't have long enough attention spans to listen to the rules in the beginning. But me? I had my eyes on the prize. You gained the most points by hitting the targets, so I'd creep through the course as quickly and stealthily as

possible and make my way into a little unknown nook where I could reach the targets with my laser beams. I'd perch up in my hidden corner and use every single bullet I had for those targets until my gun read "0," and it was time to recharge. Then, I'd speed walk back to base with my arms up (the universal signal of "don't waste your lasers on me because it won't count"), load up, and go again.

I was a total master of my craft, the Lara Croft of laser beams. Yet since I'm a mere mortal, every so often, I found myself caught in the opposing team's crossfire. Getting shot was the pits because your gun would disable, and then a Darth Vader voice would interrupt all of your plans for total domination and force you to stand there exposed and defenseless until it finished shouting four foul words:

*"Shields up! Shields down."*

The moment my shields went up, my guard would, too. It had to since my vest would announce to everyone within ear range that I was around and vulnerable. Those words took a million years to finish, and I'd be forced into paralysis while I waited, unable to use my trigger finger and often left to the harassment of some annoying little kid who didn't understand Laser tag etiquette and was hell-bent on reshooting me the moment my shields dropped. *Stop following me! I'm disabled! Get out of here, little kid! You're ruining my plan!*

Spending so much time in my particular corner of the course always left me feeling invincible, until of course, I wasn't. I really had no choice but to learn and master the sacred art of resting bitch face to deter overbearing peers and foes from following me back to base to attack the moment my vest stopped singing,

and gun reloaded. The thirty seconds it took for my vest to shut up were agonizing. All the blood from my fingertips would rush to my face, and I'd start to get the panic sweats where you could practically smell Dr. Pepper oozing out of my pores. Laser tag wasn't a game for me; it was an expression of my skillset as a human being, and I couldn't let some kid with nacho cheese stains all over his pants beat me. The idea of that alone was enough to send my racing heart into cardiac arrest. Once that robotic male voice declared shields down, the soda sweats would subside, blood would evenly distribute through my body again, and I'd slide right back into the zone, ready to execute my master plan, and hope to avoid another run-in with those four foul words.

Now I was focused on a new set of words as dead air lingered between Derek and me. Last Wednesday. I can pinpoint the exact day I initiated sex, and it was a week ago. Before that? Probably a month, as in, thirty to thirty-one days (unless you count that rebel, February). We have sex every day, but I can only remember 1-2 instances in a month's span where I actually initiated.

SHIELDS DOWN.

Damn it. See, here's my problem, and it's a big one: I don't like to be wrong. I've already said out loud that I do initiate sex, and now I'm stuck trying to convince my husband—who isn't an idiot and has been keeping mental tabs of when I'm getting after him—that his memory is wrong. That I'm actually the instigating sex goddess I claim to be, because this is something insecure people do when they feel attacked or taken off-guard.

SHIELDS UP.

ANDI FRANKLIN

*I don't initiate sex?! There goes that Franklin memory again! You don't remember uh, two weeks ago when I, uh, grabbed you while we were watching TV? And then, yeah, I definitely released my inner beast at least three more times that week. I never get any credit around here thanks to that shit memory of yours.*

He shrugs me off quickly. He knows when I'm trying to trap him. Annoyed but also used to my shenanigans, he lets out a breathy "heh" before walking out of the room, leaving me alone with the weight of his words. His truth.

SHIELDS DOWN.

I never initiate sex.

You know the feeling you get when you've been walking around all day with a piece of spinach in your teeth, and not a single person informs you about it? That's how this revelation felt. I was downright embarrassed and also annoyed because, *Why in the hell have you let me walk around this long with the damn spinach in-between my canines?* It's entirely possible to have a happy marriage with substantial sex and also be utterly blind to your shortcomings in apparent happy marriage with significant sex.

Initiating sex doesn't come naturally to me. It's not because I don't want sex.

I want sex.

I crave it.

I enjoy it.

I need it.

Still, years of believing it was wrong to be a sexual creature cling to me. They're like an oil stain on a dark wash tee. You can't really see it unless you're in direct sunlight, but it's still there. I stood with the sun beaming down on me, and the marks were clear.

*You're vile. You're sinful. You're unworthy. You never initiate sex because you don't deserve passion and love and full-body acceptance.*

My inner voice is a real bitch with an uncanny ability to string endless tall tales about my inadequacies from the tinniest comments. She weaves stories of abandonment and infidelity if Derek is running fifteen minutes late from work, so you can imagine the field day she had with a confrontation like this one: *You don't initiate sex, girlfriend! Why would he want to be with someone as insecure and boring as you? You can't even fulfill his needs. You're a loser — a terrible wife. And you know, what? That outfit looks ridiculous on you!*

I wish I could tell you this sort of negative self-talk was a rare occurrence for me, but that would be a big fat lie. In truth, my habit of talking down on myself had been as natural as inhaling and exhaling for as long as I can remember. My knee jerk reaction when anyone within a 100-mile radius of me was unhappy was to blame myself, and I acquired a laundry list of possible reasons why I was just the worst, for all occasions.

So there he stands, being the open, honest, loving communicator every girl dreams of, and I'm pissed. Part of me wishes he would've just kept that mortifying comment to himself, and the other half knew doing so would've been a one-way ticket to an unhappy marriage. Nobody wants to look in the mirror and

see wilted spinach staring back at them. Still, it's a hard pill to swallow, and it leaves an aftertaste that's almost worse than the fishy burps you get from taking your omega-3s. *Almost.*

*You never initiate sex.*

This is true. It's a fact, and now I'm being forced to take notice of my non-sex-initiating-skillset. So I pour a glass of wine and invite my alter-ego, Over-analyzer, to join me. She and I will spend the next 500 million hours digging deep into my psyche, unlocking secrets I buried long ago and a stockpile of baggage in a desperate attempt to answer a straightforward question: *How did I get here?*

Here, being the place where I'm a grown ass, adult woman who loves her husband, and sex, and intimacy, yet somehow cannot initiate sex. Days, weeks, and bottles of wine later, I finally came up with an answer that made sense. Even now—married to the love of my life, I was still looking for love in all the wrong places. I was tossing a freight train sized purse over my husband's shoulders filled with my value, worth, and confidence and expecting him to keep it handy for me whenever I needed to slip on something a little more comfortable.

*Hey, babe. Can you grab my self-confidence really fast? Oh, and my lip balm. My soul and lips are both super chapped.*

Of course I never initiated sex. That poor man was the unknowing keeper of all the things that would cue a person to act first. I was falling in line with what I thought he wanted 100% of the time, so if he didn't initiate intimacy because he was waiting for me to, you know, actually make him feel desired

first, then I'd assume he was uninterested or tired or angry with me for something. And then, I'd ask him a million times if he was okay and go to bed confused as to what I'd done to ruin the romantic night when in all actuality it was what I *hadn't* done.

Marriage is fun.

### UNPACKING: THE BAG

I'm going to be straight up with you: I didn't want to fix this "issue" at first. There, I said it. Don't get me wrong; I love my husband something fierce. He still gives me the tingles when the sun hits his face, and his eyes and lips illuminate. As I type this, I'm turning myself on just thinking about it, so I think you catch my drift. He's an eleven on a bad day, and I want to do bad things to that man all the freaking time. I just didn't want to initiate those sexy things.

You see, I'm a closer. You don't send your best closer in for the introductory meeting; they'd seem too desperate and ruin everything. No, your closer is best reserved for when the deal is already practically in the bag, and you need someone to tickle the balls a bit to land the deal. And that's me. That's where I shine. Closing and ball-tickling and trying not to come on too strong until I'm sure it's mine. See how I rationalize my position yet again? You guys, I'm really good at making an argument for myself in a pinch. It's a specialty of mine straight off the secret menu. *Can I get a large order of brainwashing yourself into believing you don't have any problems, with a side of crippling denial? Hold the self-loathing today; I'm trying to watch my figure.*

Maybe it was something in his voice that day or perhaps I was just tired of my shit? Once I fought off the urge to brush him aside

and continue down my path as a predictable yet solid closer, I made a quiet decision to spend some serious time working on my inner self. It was time for a career change. Update the resume girl, because you're wanted in a position as an opener, an instigator, a let's-start-this-night-off-right-er. And deep, WAY DEEP down, I knew it was something I desperately craved for myself, too.

*You never initiate sex.*

*Shields up. Shields down.*

Challenge accepted.

The funny fact about challenges is that they're freakin' challenging. What? Were you expecting an Instagram worthy quote there? Sorry to disappoint, but the truth is that we all say we like a good challenge, but once we have to dive into a said challenge and get our hands dirty, we remember that we prefer our clean cuticles and powdered nails to the cracked, dirt-filled ones that come with the work. Someone sitting in front of a computer one day found a way to take the word "challenge" and turn it into glamour. He or she edited, filtered, and put it on an all-white marble countertop covered in dozens of fresh peonies and gold flaked coffee and the rest of us drooled over it like damn fools, admiring and gasping and declaring that we too, wanted a challenge if that's what challenges look like.

Only real challenges more accurately resemble a construction worker after pulling an 80-hour work week. They're tedious, sometimes dangerous, and almost always covered in layers of grime, blood, sweat, and tears. They wear hard hats, giant goggles, and boots for support and safety, rather than fashion. Challenges

don't look like a beautiful blonde in Lululemons holding her glass water bottle and popping her booty out with the caption, "If you want it, work for it!" No, they're more akin to Ace Ventura running wildly with the white bat in tow, terrified and disgusted and just trying to get to the damn cage before the creature defecates all over the place.

When I said yes to Derek's challenge, I think a part of me was saying yes to Lululemon and manicured nails. Part of me was ready to give it my best-curated version of effort and spend more time talking about the challenge than actually working through it. But when I opened up the tattered bag I'd been forcing him to lug around for me and began rummaging through its chaotic contents, I realized the reason it was overflowing was because I'd never once in my life removed a single item from it. Sure, I'd found ways to condense, but only so I could fit more stuff inside its walls. It was a hoarder's paradise, so full of lifelong traumas, beliefs, insecurities, and everything in-between that I couldn't reach the bottom. Everything was still there, and I was just compacting it, so I'd have room for more. On the top sat my inability to initiate sex, but underneath it lied years of unchecked issues. I needed to Marie Kondo the hoarder hell that was my soul, stat. Sure, these events happened to me, but do they spark joy? If not, then it was time to thank them for our time together and kiss them goodbye.

If I were ever going to become an instigator, if I were ever going to have the opportunity to experience profound connection and vulnerability, I'd need to do far more than pull sexual confidence out of a hat. In reality, I'd need to unpack my bag completely. This meant that I had to put on my big girl panties and trade in those fancy leggings for some heavy-duty pants. This implied I'd need a hard hat, goggles, and a blueprint of everything

ANDI FRANKLIN

I needed to demolish, fix, and rebuild. So I laced up, bent down, and flipped my purse full of emotional chaos over dumping every last thing out onto the floor in front of me. I wanted to start from the beginning. I tried to find the first memory ever to make its way into this bag, so I combed through the petrified pile until I found it. There it was—the very first item to ever make its way into this purse of mine. A tattered, stained, crumpled up piece of paper. I pulled the edges apart to reveal its identity. A \$25 Target gift certificate, addressed to a seven-year-old little girl. It was addressed to me.