

HANDLING YOUR MAN

My father is an angry guy. The kind, for example, who'll emit steam from his ears when he goes to take a sip of water and discovers his glass is empty. There have been so many empty glasses over the years. He would never come right out and say anything, of course. The mere slamming of his Mylar cup onto the dinner table would be plenty of signal it was time for my mother to rush to the refrigerator in blubbering subservience to refill the goblet of His Majesty.

"Here! Here! Here!" she'd say, scurrying back to the table, holding the water pitcher with an urgency that would suggest not so much that her husband was thirsty as that he was on fire.

"Your father likes his water cold," my mother confided to me while we loaded the dishwasher later that evening, as though she were passing down a life lesson that, at age fifteen, I was finally old enough to understand.

My mother has spent her entire married life figuring out ways to keep my dad happy.

There have been far too many times in my adult dealings with men when I, sadly, reminded myself of my mother.

"I must have done or said something to provoke him," I thought on one of these unfortunate occasions when my boyfriend Ronnie flipped a table over at an out-of-the-way sushi restaurant impatient with my inability to decide between the Pumpkin-Crusted Albacore and the Tofu Tataki.

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"Next time I won't take so long to order." I didn't know it wasn't my fault; I was twenty-one--I hadn't yet been to therapy.

One day I told Ronnie (one too many times, evidently) that he took too long to get dressed.

He took forever to get ready all the time...and invariably, it drove me crazy. Before we could go anywhere, he had to shower and shave and fix his hair just right and change his clothes a thousand times, then sew a button or iron a collar or roll a sleeve--and we were supposed to be doing something spontaneous!

"Wanna' go to the Park Avenue street fair, Ronnie?" I remember myself congenially asking one sunny Saturday afternoon.

Ronnie just sighed in his usual, indifferent manner, "Sure."

But, by the time he got dressed, the occasion wasn't spur-of-the-moment anymore. It had turned into a big, planned ordeal with outfits and lint brushes, a just-in-case umbrella.

I didn't feel like participating in events that felt planned. That's what my parents always did--planned things that were supposed to be fun and light-hearted, but inevitably turned into huge, torturous labors because my parents were motivated by guilt and obligation rather than by the pure joy of embracing their loved ones--the pure joy of anything! And that's all I longed for--joy. Oh, yeah--and to be embraced.

So, for every piece of lint that Ronnie plucked off his clean khaki trousers and every tidy tuck of his starched broadcloth shirt, I was reeled further back into the past, and I didn't want to go to the street fair anymore because I was depressed and confused and, frankly, borderline catatonic.

I could never explain this complicated, Jungian mess to Ronnie because, aside from struggling with his own issues (unconsciously, of course) about being adopted, then beaten by his mother (repeatedly, with a hair brush), then butt-fucked in prison (excuse the language) when he was nineteen, Ronnie wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed. But he was handsome and strong and capable in his own way and awfully sexy.

"Does this outside seam look crooked on the left leg?" Ronnie said studying his blue jeans before the full-length mirror. "Look! It's almost hitting the center of my shoe!"

Feigning interest, I examined the suspicious seam. "Hmm...no...it looks really straight."

He checked again, "Are you sure?" Ronnie was transfixed on his pants, turning and posing before the mirror like a chubby teen uncertain of her prom dress. "Fuck! It's crooked!" he yelled. "Why do all the fuckin' five-o-one's do that?!!"

"They do?" I wondered. "And if they did, why hadn't I noticed?" I silently reproached myself for not being more observant.

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"They aren't crooked, Ronnie. Besides, who cares?" I admonished. "Let's just go!"

Ronnie glared, and when I saw his blue eyes turn steel gray, I knew I'd gone too far. It occurred to me, maybe this would be a time for ice cream. My mother used cold water; perhaps a more contemporary and efficient way to handle to my man would be with ice cream. I hadn't yet learned that other even more effective options were available--such as, for example, walking away.

"Why do you always have to get on my fucking case?" he said, ripping off his jeans, then pushing me aside as he stormed into the closet. He shoved his muscular legs through a pair of freshly pressed shorts with the urgency of a firefighter on a 911 call. "Bitch! Bitch! You fucking nosey, controlling, fucking bitch!" He jerked t-shirts from hangers, trying one on, then yanking off another, his arms working like a windmill in a hurricane, finally refusing to wear any of them because "this goddamn piece of shit doesn't fit right" or a natural nub in the material looked to him "like a fucking flaw."

In my opinion, it isn't normal for a boy to be fussing with his clothes that much. It's too girlie. You'd think a guy who punched his fist through sheet rock wouldn't care about fabric.

When we finally did arrive at the street fair, and I saw that all the booths were shutting down, I couldn't hide my disappointment.

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"Shoot! We got here too late," I said, hoping Ronnie would apologize.

Ronnie hadn't heard me. He was busy checking to see if his belt looked better fastened on the third or the second hole.

"Why can't you get ready faster?" I whined. "We're always laaaaaate!"

Well, I might as well have called him an idiot. Because to an insecure, inadequate guy like Ronnie, that's exactly what he heard--"stupid, adopted, hair-brush beaten, butt-fucked idiot!"

So, out of nowhere, while I was eyeing a collection of lampshades a vendor was busily loading into his van, Ronnie started wailing on me, knocking me to the ground and calling me "Bitch!" every time he kicked me.

"Stop getting on my case, Bitch! You messy, fucking sloppy Bitch!"

That really upset me. I might be messy, but I'm not sloppy.

I was crouched against the Citibank building, covering my head with my hands and peering through my fingers at Ronnie's flailing arms, when I noticed a gathering crowd and then men in blue uniforms.

The police? I wondered. Why are the police here? Maybe they're trying to plant an unlicensed handgun and we're in the way.

They tried to pull Ronnie off of me. "Let go of the lady, sir!"

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But, Ronnie wouldn't budge.

"Wait!" I thought. "Give him an ice cream cone. That'll calm him down!" Shakespeare says that music soothes the savage beast. I've found that frozen dairy products work just as well.

Back to the altercation, it unfortunately took four of New York's finest to finally peel Ronnie off, and only after they wrestled him to the ground and cuffed his hands behind his back did he stop struggling.

"Ma'am? Are you okay?" the cop asked as he ushered me to safety.

I couldn't be bothered answering. I was too concerned with Ronnie--was he okay? Just as Ronnie was transfixed by jeans, I was transfixed by him. I couldn't bear to see him lying on the ground--defenseless, frightened, bewildered and out-of-breath--the way a rodeo calf looks after being roped and bound.

"Would you like to press charges?" the cop asked.

"Charges? Um...for what?"

"Assault," he said. "This man assaulted you."

"He did? Oh. Well...um--no. No--of course not. He's my boyfriend," I explained. "He loves me. He loves me very much."

When I told my mother a few months later why Ronnie and I were no longer dating, my mother had a surprising take: she suggested that I probably provoked the fight. She said that although she didn't "like" that Ronnie had hit me, she

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could certainly understand how I could irritate someone to the point that he would lose control...so much so that even ice cream couldn't bring him back.

I wanted to say something, but before I could, the bell from my mother's microwave rang in the background. Apparently, dinner was ready and His Majesty was waiting to be served.