

HANDLING YOUR MAN

My father is an angry guy. The kind of guy who, for example, when he reaches to take a sip of water and discovers his glass is empty, steam will emit from his ears. Over the years, there have been more empty glasses than I can count. And enough steam to rival Mt Saint Helens. He would never come right out and say anything...or, God forbid, get up and hydrate himself. His M.O., rather, would be to slam his Mylar cup onto the dinner table, thereby signaling my mother it was time for her 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 pitcher with an urgency that would suggest not so much that her husband was thirsty as that he was on fire.

"Jann, your father likes his water cold," my mother confided to me while we loaded the dishwasher later that evening, as though she were an oracle passing down a nugget

of eternal wisdom that, at age fifteen, I was finally old enough to be trusted with.

My mother has spent her entire married life figuring out ways to keep my father happy, or, to put it more precisely, figuring out ways to manage his tantrums. There have been far too many times in my adult dealings with men when I, sadly, have reminded myself of my mother. These have not been pleasant moments.

"I must have done or said something to upset him," I thought on one of these unfortunate occasions when my boyfriend Ronnie flipped a table over at an out-of-the-way, lower east side sushi restaurant, impatient with my inability to decide between the Pumpkin-Nut Crusted Halibut, the Thai-Glazed Tofu Tataki or the Japanese Cedar-Seared Salmon Napoleon with Boucheron Goat Cheese Voulute'. "Next time I won't take so long to order." I thought to myself. I didn't know Ronnie's intolerance wasn't my fault; I was only twenty-one and from Arizona...I'd never heard of therapy.

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

He did. 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, roll a sleeve or re-lace a shoe...all this in advance of an occasion whose intention as well as the appeal was to do something lighthearted and spontaneous!

"Hey, Ronnie. Wanna go to the Park Avenue street fair?" I remember myself saying as I playfully wrapped my arms around his unresponsive shoulders one sunny Sunday afternoon.

Ronnie responded in his usual, simple-minded manner, "Yeah...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 don't like participating in events that feel planned. That's what my parents always did--planned things that were supposed to be fun and breezy but inevitably turned into huge, torturous labors...mostly 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...preferably by a loved one...with responsive shoulders.

Which meant that 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 my agonizing past, and I no longer wanted to go the street fair because I was depressed, confused, overwhelmed, and, frankly, analytically maxed-out.

I could never explain this complicated, Jungian gumbo to Ronnie because, aside from struggling with his own issues (unconsciously, of course) about being adopted, then beaten by his mother (repeatedly, with a hairbrush, a wooden spoon or any other utensil at hand), then, when he was nineteen, having been butt-fucked in prison (excuse the language, but it happened) Ronnie was about as psychologically evolved as a lower reptile; his needs were primal--eat, sleep, have sex, and then go lie in the sun. But he was handsome and strong and capable in his own way. And in my limited understanding, this kind of male was not only considered normal -- he was coveted.

"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 pretty straight to me."

"You sure?" Ronnie checked again, carefully. He was transfixed by his pants, nervously turning and posing before the mirror like a chubby debutante uncertain about her prom dress. "It's fucking crooked!" he yelled. "Goddamnit! 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.

"You look great, Ronnie." I encouraged. "Besides, who cares? Let's just go!"

Ronnie whipped his head around at me and glared...and when I saw his blue eyes turn steel gray, I knew I'd crossed a line. It occurred to me maybe this would be a good time for ice cream. My mother used cold water to calm my father down; perhaps a more contemporary and efficient way for me to handle to my man would be with ice cream. It would be impossible for anyone to stay angry while licking chocolate sprinkles off a double soft-serve. So I ran to the freezer, which, apart from a box of frosted-over veggie sausage, unfortunately, was bare. I hadn't yet learned that other even more effective options were available to me-- such as, for example, walking away. For good.

"Why do you always have to get on my case, bitch?" Ronnie snapped, ripping off his jeans then pushing me aside

as he stormed into the closet. With the exigency of a firefighter on a 911 call, he shoved his muscular legs through a pair of freshly pressed shorts. "Bitch! Bitch! You fucking nosey, controlling, fucking nosey fucking bitch!" As you can see, Ronnie was not much of a wordsmith. He jerked t-shirts from hangers, trying one on and 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 -- fucking armholes!" Or, because a natural nub in the material looked to him "like a goddamn fucking flaw."

In my opinion, it isn't normal for a boy to be fussing with his clothes that much. It's too girly. You'd think a guy who routinely expressed emotion by punching his fist through sheetrock wouldn't care so earth-shatteringly about fabric.

When we finally did arrive at the street fair -- over an hour and a half later -- and I saw that all the booths were shutting down, I couldn't hide my disappointment. Before leaving his apartment, by the way, Ronnie insisted on folding all his t-shirts into perfect squares then organizing them by color.

"Shoot!" I sighed. "Everything is closed!" I hoped that Ronnie would apologize, but he hadn't heard a word.

He was too busy checking to see if his belt looked better fastened on the third or the second hole.

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

Well, I might as well have called him an idiot. Because to an insecure, inadequate, simple-minded, maladjusted, Neanderthal like Ronnie, that's exactly what he heard--"stupid, adopted, hairbrush/wooden-spoon beaten, butt-fucked idiot!"

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

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

That really upset me. I'll admit I'm messy, but I'm certainly not sloppy. There's a distinction, and I maintain it. As a matter of fact, in the interest of full disclosure, I'm closer, by light years, to Felix than Oscar.

Anyway, there I was, in the middle of New York City, crouched against a luxury, pre-war, door-manned apartment 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 on somebody and we got in the way.

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

But, Ronnie wouldn't budge.

"Wait!" I thought. "Give him some Chunky Monkey! Maybe that'll tranquilize him. Shakespeare says 'music soothes the savage beast.' Why couldn't a frozen dairy product work just as well?"

Back to the altercation, it ultimately took four of New York's finest to drag Ronnie off of me, and he continued to put up a fight till the cops wrestled him to the ground, then cuffed his hands behind his back.

A kindly cop ushered me to safety. "Are you okay, ma'am?"

I couldn't be bothered answering. I was too concerned with Ronnie--was he okay? Just as Ronnie was transfixed by blue jeans, I was transfixed by him. I couldn't bear to see him lying on the ground.. his face pressed against the hot pavement--defenseless, frightened, bewildered...out-of-

breath--the way a rodeo calf looks after being roped and bound.

"I'm sure you'll want to press charges," I remember the kindly cop saying.

"Charges? Um...for what?"

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

"He did? Oh. Well, um--no. No, of course I'm not going to press charges. He's my boyfriend," I explained.

"He loves me. He loves me very much."

When I told my mother a few months later why I was no longer dating "good-looking" Ronnie, my mom had a surprising take: it was her assessment that I probably provoked the fight. She said that although she didn't "like" that Ronnie had hit me, she 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.

My mom.

I wanted to reply...I wanted to cry and then reply, but before I could, the bell from my mother's microwave rang in the background. Dinner was ready, and His Majesty was waiting to be served.