

The Married Man's Trial and Conviction

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An unexpected sequel to The Married Man's Lament.

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She was there the next day. Standing at the railing. Looking at the water. Drinking her coffee. Aware of my presence as I drank my coffee. As I also drank in her presence. I sat on the bench and admired the view, as I had the day before. It was only one day after we first melded our minds through brief eye contact. Two occurrences create a pattern. Patterns signal the beginning of habits. Every work day for the next few weeks, we saw each other. When we were buying coffee. When we were crossing the street. When we were drinking our coffee. When we were steeling ourselves to face the day. We nodded to each other. We smiled at each other. We said, "Good morning." to each other as if that is the most profound utterance in the Universe. Not daring to say more. Monday mornings became something to look forward to. Weekend mornings became less joyfull. It was a good habit to begin. And then one beautiful Monday morning, she was sitting at my bench when I got there. My bench. Where I sat every workday easing myself into the idea of going to my job. Ramping up my dynamo with a dose of caffeine. I sat beside her. Not too close. Not so close that we couldn't both turn toward each other without touching our knees together. Perhaps both of us were thinking of how wonderful that would be. I remember that I was. "Hi. I'm Charles. Charlie. I was getting used to seeing you at the railing." "Hi, Charlie. I'm Rose. I felt like sitting today. I wore myself out gardening on the weekend. You don't mind me sitting here, do you?" "Not at all, Rose. I admired the view when you stood by the railing, but the company is nicer when you're sitting here." Until that point, neither of us had turned to look at the other, but both of us had used the sideways glance to verify that. She turned her face to me then. "Thank you. I won't tell my husband that you said that. He's the jealous type." I heard the smile in her words. Smiling, I turned my head to look at her smile and then into her eyes. "I can see why. Please don't tell my wife either. She would ask me every day whether I saw you that day." Having said the words, "husband" and "wife", we had both ceremoniously raised our shields. We knew that it was unlikely that our spouses would ever meet the other, or each other. We were clearly both solitary commuters from the 'burbs. With shields in place, we could speak with each other safely now. We could talk about mundane things and maybe even flirt a little. And we could dream together about the possibilities. We could each think about the pleasures to be found in the arms of the other, in a place much less public, and in much less clothing. Looking in each other's eyes, we saw all of that. And we both knew that the other knew all of that. And the smiles stayed in place. For

the next too many years, we drank coffee together and talked to each other. We learned the names of each other's loved ones. We asked about the school plays and the big games and the illnesses and injuries of each other's children. We shared our career triumphs and tragedies and the anecdotes of our boneheaded bosses and airheaded coworkers. We shared stories about our vacations and holidays. We talked about our future plans all the way to our golden years. We had much in common. We had common desires for the same common things. A cabin in the mountains. A smaller emphasis on things and a greater emphasis on periods of Inner Peace. More time to read good books beside a warm cozy fire. More time to be in nice company. We preferred to meet outside, across the street from the coffee shop, on our bench, but when the weather was bad, we had our table inside. For all of twenty minutes per day, five days per week, excluding holidays and vacations and the occasional business travel, while we sipped our coffees, we were a couple. On days when the other mysteriously did not show up, we worried until we got a call at our desk or saw each other the next day. A few months ago, she changed. Her marriage had hit the roughest waters yet and was heading for the rocks. She'd caught her husband cheating. They were trying to make it work. She was so very grateful that she had my shoulder to cry on. So thankful that I braced her. That I was there to help her face the days. "And I wish that I could be angry at all men, because of what he did, but I know how close I came so many times to trying to drag you across that Line. I'm so glad that you never took advantage of my weakness. I could not have maintained my self-respect if I had become the first in my marriage to betray the other." The Line. An invisible plane between us, really. Made from two shields, her marriage and mine, reaching from the ground to infinity, or at least higher than either of us could get our entire heart over. We had mentioned it before. At times it seemed as solid as glass and impenetrably thick. At other times, in moments of weakness, it was only strong enough to keep us apart because only one of us was weak. We could shake hands through it, and if we were both standing when we met each other, we would hold each other's hands, both in both, for perhaps two seconds too long. Two seconds that proved we were more than friends. Two seconds that prevented us from believing we were not already lovers. We always pulled away at the same time, using those extra two seconds to affirm the love we could not confirm with words. We could even hug across the Line. Not often. Only when it was 'the right thing to do'. I could count the hugs we had shared over the years on one hand. Each was brief, but comforting for the one who needed it. When her father died. When my daughter was in the hospital after a skiing accident. When an aging friend became gravely ill. When her husband crossed the Line with another woman. Despite its undesirability, the Line was a mutual necessity. It helped us stay close but apart while she struggled with her marital strife. The Line was a comfort, until today. It was the product of mutual respect, but it suddenly became halfway obsolete. That wasn't unexpected, but it was a threat to our habit. Today, a day that starts like many other Fridays, with the knowledge that I will not see Rose again for 72 hours, she waits at the coffee shop and buys my coffee for me. It is clearly a special day. It is part of our ritual to buy for the other when we have 'big' news. I can see sadness in her eyes, not at all unusual ever since the sad day when she told me about her husband's betrayal, but there is also strength and concern and something not quite so easy to guess. Hope maybe. I know that the news will come after the ritual. I

place my hand on her back as we walk across the street. I don't push hard, just enough to be felt. She leans back into it, receiving the strength I offer. We sit on our bench. We pull the lids off our cups. We sniff deeply across the tops of the cups. We sip. We savor. We smile. Ritual complete. "It's over. He's out of the house. I filed the papers yesterday. Please don't offer condolences. I'm relieved, and for now, that's... enough." I don't know what to say. 'I'm happy for you.' sure doesn't seem appropriate. I turn to her. Not just with my face, my whole body. She turns also. Our knees touch. I hold out my cup. "Here's to the future, Rose." "To a new beginning, Charlie." We 'clink' our paper cups together and sip and smile. One shield is down and she looks more open than she ever has. But not to me. To the world. She is back on the market and ready for some adventure. "I want you..." "Rose..." "...but I can't have you. I know that. But I still want this. Our mornings together mean more to me than you can imagine." I do not say the words I would have said. 'Take me. I am yours.' I've never been as weak as I was when I heard my only lover say, 'I want you'. But I know that she would blame herself for destroying what is only held together by loveless conviction, by a sense of duty without enthusiasm. Where the enthusiasm went, I cannot say. My body never did, but my heart strayed long ago. But I don't think Madeleine ever noticed. The spark went out of her eyes before it happened. For her, our spiritless marriage became a habit, like my morning cup, before I met Rose. The end of mutual *joie de vivre* began with a pattern of endless days of ennui. We simply stopped being interesting to each other. "I think I can imagine." "Will I still see you here? Every day?" "I'll be here. I can't imagine facing my job each day without touching your hands, seeing your smiling face, smelling your perfume, knowing your caffeine addiction has been satisfied and feeling your... I'll be here." Our knees are still touching. It is almost not enough. We finish our coffees and go our separate ways for the day. I am called from my desk just before lunchtime. There's a man waiting in the lobby. The receptionist points me to him. A vague sense of unease grows in me. This is abnormal. "Charles Goodman?" "Yes, that's me." He hands me an envelope. "You have my sympathies." He leaves. The envelope has the name of Rose's employer on it. Her law firm. I dare not hope for what I might find inside. I almost dare not read for what else I might find inside. "Yes!", I shout with joy as I read the first lines, startling the receptionist. My spirits soar as I walk down the block with the envelope. This calls for a burger and a beer! I read the entire petition and I'm sure the grin could not be wiped from my face with a belt sander. Never have the words 'irreconcilable differences' been so perfect. Back in my office with a satiated belly, I try to call Rose. "May I ask who's calling, please?" This is strange. Her receptionist usually puts me right through. "Charles Goodman." "Mr. Goodman, Ms. Livesay-Coo..., Ms. Livesay won't be available for the rest of the afternoon. But she left a message for you. 'Happy hour at O'Malley's' is all it says." "Thank you. If you see her, please tell I'll be there." I call my wife. "Hello. It's me. I won't be coming home tonight." "Is that all you have to say?" "Well, I am kind of curious. Why now?" "Out of the mouths of babes. Your daughter's exact words were, 'If you don't hate each other, why are you prolonging the misery?'" "That's funny. She's your daughter, too, you know." "Can't be. Way too smart." "Will you pack a bag for me? Enough clothes for a week? I'll send a cab for it." "Sure. I'll have it ready by 7:00. It will be in the garage. I won't be here." "Thank you." "For what?" "Everything." "She'll be good for you, Charlie." "who?" "Rose Livesay. The woman you drink coffee

with." "How...? We never..." "I know, Charlie. She's been good for you since you met. You've been a prince. You deserve a chance at better. You've been tried and convicted of being unnecessarily faithful. Your sentence has been served. Good-bye, Charlie." I hear her crying as she waits for the closing sentiments from her partner of too many years. "Au revoir, Madeleine. I'll toast to your future happiness tonight." She sobs and hangs up. Toast complete, I savor my second beer of the day in the ambiance of an afterwork crowd, mostly commuters who are beginning to wind down for the weekend. I ponder how Madeleine came to know that Rose had dropped the '-Cooper' from 'Livesay-Cooper'. Rose enters the bar and sees me. She's wearing the same clothes that I saw her in, just 9 hours earlier, but she looks very different. Her hair, her makeup, her open top button on her pale blue silk blouse. The overall effect is stunning. She is not the woman who walked away from me in the morning. She's walking the same determined walk, but the direction has reversed in more than just the physical sense. I stand as she approaches. My heart is soaring. "Rose! Please, let me buy you a drink. I have big news." "I know your news, Charlie. I'll pass on the drink... for now." Of course she would know the news. The divorce petition was filed by one of the junior partners of her firm. One of her bosses. We've never been to a Happy Hour together. We've seen each other here, but this is a new beginning. Clearly she knows about the petition. "I tried to call you..." "I couldn't talk to you then. Not after I saw how you took the news." She's smiling like the Cheshire Cat. "I've never seen a man who so enjoyed a hamburger. I've spent the afternoon building a Chinese Wall, dear." "A what...?" "I can't speak with, or in any way exchange information with Madeleine's attorney until the proceedings are final. It wouldn't be ethical. All of my coworkers know that your divorce is not to be discussed with me. I've put myself on your side of the wall, Charlie. The Line is gone." I place my hands on her hips. That contact fuels the fires that have been slowly smoldering in our nethers since the moment our eyes met in the coffee shop, too many years ago. She gazes into my eyes and leans into me, wordlessly acknowledging that the desire is mutual, adding oxygen to our mix. The necessary elements for a blaze in place, we lose control and kiss with more passion than our soon-to-be-exes have ever inspired. A passion we had each believed we could never share. There is body contact. Lots of it. The Line is summarily combusted by our flame. We physically feel each other's growing desire for more than we can reveal in public. As if we share one mind, we break the kiss. I start to speak, but she puts a finger to my lips. "The boys are with their father this weekend. We have a place." "Take me there." Aware of the double entendre in my words, she does.