

It is early in the morning and Virginia is brushing her teeth. She takes great care to avoid brushing her sensitive gums because Thibault is frightened by blood in the sink. This morning, she is running late to work and has forgotten to screw the cap back onto the toothpaste. She dresses quickly then descends a flight of stairs to the first floor. Virginia needs caffeine. She turns on the light in the kitchen and a lightbulb bursts. She drinks her first cup of coffee in the dark while making a mental note to fix the light.

Thibault is lucky. He sleeps until he is awakened by natural light. Now, he is lost in a dream about children operating machinery in a massive rice packaging factory. Children have been infiltrating his dreams ever since Virginia picked up a self-help book on successful parenting. She is not a mother because she resents it when children get lost in grocery stores. Last night, Virginia told Thibault that influenceable men make good fathers<sup>1</sup>. He asked: “Am I influenceable?” She answered: “Do I like you?” Sometimes, Thibault wishes that he could sue advice columnists, therapists, and stereotypes. He believes that people make marriage more complicated than it needs to be.

Virginia collects self-help books because she enjoys mocking bad advice in bed by lamp light. Sometimes she turns to Thibault and says something like, “Did you know that men are drawn to marriage for sex and women for love<sup>2</sup>?” He feels coerced into thinking up creative reasons for loving her, if only to prove these statements wrong: “I love you for hosting dinner parties and deliberately forgetting to invite guests so that we can avoid the burden of making small talk.” Both Virginia and Thibault enjoy intimate meals at their dining table when it is set for twenty people. They find it interesting to eat in a circle of quiet plates and silverware.

Virginia works in a church, cleaning. She does not think that she is religious, but she likes the idea of religion and she likes overhearing conversations between the priest and his assistant. Once, the priest made a joke: “pre-marital sex is a sin<sup>3</sup>, but in times of societal hardship, like genocide, pre-marital sex is okay because God is distracted.” The priest’s assistant chuckled uncomfortably. Another time, the priest asked Virginia to make him coffee. She did so, but took a couple of sips from his “I Love God” mug before delivering it to him. Virginia takes pleasure in doing things when no one but God is watching.

Today, her first order of business is cleaning the confession booth. She drags a rag across the stained wood while letting her mind wander. She remembers getting married in this church. After the ceremony, she asked the priest if God could grant her a job. The priest looked up at the baroque ceiling, which was in need of repairs, before meeting Virginia’s eyes. Hesitantly, he offered her a job as the church janitor. Not only had the previous janitor recently passed away, but his funeral had been held directly before Virginia’s wedding. Virginia was quick to accept the priest’s offer because she liked the idea of her job being a product of divine intervention.

Since the wedding, Thibault has not returned to the church. He feels uncomfortable stepping into established holy spaces because he enjoys day drinking on Sundays and

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<sup>1</sup> This theory is taken from “Three ways to build a happy marriage and avoid divorce,” a TED Talk delivered by author, researcher, and doctor George Blair-West. In the talk, he also states that in order to have a successful marriage, both spouses must uphold an equal power in the relationship.

<sup>2</sup> This idea is discussed in “The Family as Process and Institution” by Clifford Kirkpatrick.

<sup>3</sup> In parochial schools students are taught to abstain from having sex because pre-marital sex is a sin. It is important to teach students the importance of protection because having unprotected intercourse can lead to unwanted teenage pregnancies.

role-playing as Satan<sup>4</sup>. He would rather ask Virginia to bring out the pitchfork than the bible. Not to say that Thibault does not reflect fondly on the one night that Virginia brought home spare nun garb from an unused box in the church basement. The black and white habit dangling from her hair fulfilled the most perverted childhood fantasies from his brief stint in Catholic middle school. Contrary to Virginia's regular claims that Thibault is only married for consistent sex, he is very much in love.

Thibault and Virginia met several years ago while revisiting their hometown of Parsippany, New Jersey. They had returned to celebrate Christmas with their respective families. Thibault's mother, Blythe was recently widowed and lived alone in a grand house on the corner of a standard residential street. Blythe often thought about her late husband and the various stages of death that one experiences when they die. Her favorite stage was rigor mortis<sup>5</sup>. She also spent hours every day looking at her reflection in a full length mirror. She even hired the neighbor's boy to move a sofa in front of the mirror so that she could do so in comfort. Thibault asked her: "Aren't you supposed to gaze out of a window or something?" She said: "I learn truths about humanity from gazing into myself. My external self is a vessel designed by God to contain my mind. Also, can you buy me more hair dye, my roots are beginning to show?" Thibault answered: "Okay."

Both of Virginia's parents were alive and well. They lived with two parrots in a small Art Deco house several blocks away from Blythe's grand house. Virginia's relationship with her mother, Florence, had been reduced to their tradition of drinking spiked eggnog on Christmas Eve and toasting "to another year." Virginia's mother was insecure. She had always disliked her throaty voice, the disproportion between her wide torso and her spindly legs, her tendency to project her own insecurities on other people, and her laugh. The only time she ever laughed in Virginia's lifetime was when her husband told her the world was ending tomorrow. It was not funny. The world did not end the following day. She did not know why she laughed. Florence's husband, Ken, only talked to Virginia about finances. He stayed with Florence because of their prenuptial agreement<sup>6</sup>, which stated that in the event of a divorce, he had to give her money. Ken does not give anyone his money.

Thibault first noticed Virginia in the beauty aisle of a CVS buying brown hair dye for Florence. He was drawn to the way she looked. Her features were gentle, but boyish, framed by ginger hair that was cut crudely at her shoulders. He approached her on an impulse, asking what hair dye she recommended.

"You know as well as I do," she responded, "I'm here for my mother. Christmas gift."

"I'm here for my mother as well!" Thibault exclaimed.

"Oh." Virginia was not used to male attention. Everyone thought she was a lesbian. She liked lesbians, but she liked men more because men can not give birth.

Virginia and Thibault claim that they have no memory of what happened next. Virginia blames it on a girl who painted her nails in a parallel aisle: "The toxic fumes altered my memory in that hour." Thibault blames the lapse on his emotions: "They completely took over my brain!"

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<sup>4</sup> Marriage-counselors suggest role-playing in the bedroom to spice up marriages that have fallen into dull routines.

<sup>5</sup> Rigor Mortis is the third stage of death, characterized by the stiffening of the limbs of a corpse caused by chemical changes in the muscles a few hours after death, usually lasting from one to four days.

<sup>6</sup> A prenuptial agreement is an agreement made by a couple before they marry concerning the ownership of their respective assets should the marriage fail.

In truth, Thibault had asked Virginia for her phone number and she had given it to him, and they refused to be a cliché.

Thibault is a bartender that works every week-day from two in the afternoon to ten in the evening. When he was promoted to bar manager he turned down the promotion because he likes his shift. In the late afternoon, the bar attracts the same crowd of local, older men. They look similar, but Thibault has learned to differentiate their balding heads. The men enjoy gossiping about their wives. Amos, a retired U.S. Navy SEAL, has a superiority complex because he has been married the longest: “Sixty-seven years and all I’ve learned is that love is a feeling and monogamy is a rule.”<sup>7</sup> A plumber named Earl believes that monogamy is not natural: “That’s why we have to work for it, goddamnit!” Thibault listens to such banter as he pours whiskey over ice.

Virginia calls Thibault “Husband” because she does not like his name. “Husband, what are you reading?” The day has come and gone and Thibault sits hunched over a newspaper at the kitchen table while Virginia steams milk with honey by the sink. Thibault looks up.

“I detest it when you call me that.”

“Yes, but Thibault doesn’t suit you.” Virginia is bored of Thibault’s looks. Sometimes she wishes that she was married to a man with sleeves of tattoos, multiple septum piercings, facial hair, and a motorcycle. Then she remembers that men with elaborate facades are most likely using their appearances to convince people that they are more interesting than they really are, but what does it mean to be interesting? Is anyone interesting? Is Virginia’s marriage interesting? It is easy to forget why she finds Thibault interesting because he has a face that blends into crowds and is frequently overlooked in family photographs. Fortunately, he is introverted and prefers keeping a low-profile. Virginia notices that Thibault has gone back to reading the newspaper.

“Tell me something interesting or I might die.” Virginia pleads.

“Married people live longer than single people.”

“Really?”

“Not if they get cancer.”

“Then let’s make love while we still can.”

“Um, okay.”

In the bedroom, Virginia undresses, dropping each item of clothing onto the floor in a pile from large to small. She takes her time counting each item as she drops it. Thibault slips into the bathroom to brush his teeth and finds the toothpaste uncapped. He brushes his teeth slowly, wondering how old he will be when he has sex for the last time<sup>8</sup>. Virginia wonders if Thibault is happy. It is difficult to tell because he remains calm under most circumstances. She has never seen him cry and that scares her. She remembers when they first realized that they could never afford a luxury vacation together. He assured her that he was happy enough drinking red wine and watching Love Island as long as they were together, but Virginia knows Thibault is keeping secrets. Every day when she leaves for work in the morning he has several hours to himself before his shift begins. When she asks him what he does, he always has the same answers:

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<sup>7</sup> It is a common misconception that love and monogamy are one in the same. This is discussed and proven otherwise in an episode on Monogamy in the Netflix series: Explained. The same episode explains that humans are the only animals that have sex to bond as well as to have children.

<sup>8</sup> The average age when men stop engaging in intercourse is eighty-five.

“reading, running errands, and thinking about you.” She wants to respect his privacy. Still, she can not help but wonder about these things.

Thibault steps out of the bathroom, fully dressed, to stand before Virginia, who sits naked on the bed.

“I cheated on you.”

“Husband, you are so bad. Come over here so that I can punish you properly.” Virginia loves to be seductive. Thibault approaches her to sit on the edge of the bed.

“His name is Armand.”

“A man? How oddly specific.”

“Virginia, listen to me. I cheated on you, but I’ve ended it.” There is a long pause. Virginia stares into Thibault’s face and fails to recognize it. Many years have passed since she has stared at someone so intensely. Momentarily, she is reminded of a month when Florence took up painting. That month, she had painted the portrait of Virginia that lives above her mantelpiece. Virginia remembers how it felt to be scrutinized by her mother. It was a visceral feeling of being seen and ignored all at once. Now, Virginia scrutinizes the space between Thibault’s eyebrows in a similar manner. Her eyes travel down his nose to his solemn lips to the shadow beneath his neck. The idea that another individual might find her husband attractive has never occurred to her.

“What in God's name is marriage?”

“Virginia, I’m so sorry.”

“Please, sleep on the couch tonight.” Thibault leaves the room without another word. Virginia thinks: Why did he leave so quickly? Why didn’t he drop to his knees to grip the cuffs of my pants like this is some scene in a soap opera? Was it wrong to expect him to stay and fight for our marriage on the basis of intuition alone?

Virginia begins pacing back and forth across the Persian carpet on her bedroom floor, following the abstract lines with her bare feet. She visualizes Thibault with another man in bed. In her vision, both men have the same face. Imagining that Thibault has had an affair with himself makes his infidelity easier to bear. Virginia considers whether or not she should tell her parents. Florence would say: “I told you so.” She does not like Thibault because she mistakes his shyness for apathy. Ken would say: “I wish you had not told me that.” Other people’s misfortunes make him uncomfortable.

What saddens Virginia is knowing that she will forgive Thibault because she loves him too much to live without him. She loves his quiet presence in their household and the way that he talks about music. She remembers when he invested a stipend of his savings in a used grand piano from Craigslist. The piano occupies their entire living room, but when Thibault plays, his music seems to transcend the boundaries of space and time. His music is an alternate reality where every sound is a sweet embrace. As if he can hear her thoughts, Thibault begins to play a sad melody downstairs. Virginia lets the music consume her for a moment. If Thibault never stopped playing then she could forget that he ever loved a man. If he never stopped playing then she could read a self-help book about cheating and it would not apply to her. If he never stopped playing then she would never feel pain. The music falters and stops. Virginia can feel a rock forming in her throat.

Virginia collapses onto her unmade bed. She remains there for hours, weeping and releasing heartfelt moans. Orange lamp light casts harsh shadows over her face. She turns to watch a moth fluttering near the lamp. As the moth floats away from the light, Virginia reaches

out to catch it with both hands. Momentarily imprisoned, the moth is driven into a panic. Virginia can feel its delicate wings tickle her palms. She imagines what it must feel like to be at the mercy of another in a matter of seconds. Is the moth in love? If she crushed it with her fist, would another moth grieve? If God has such power with humans then God must be depressed. The moth stops moving, surrendering to Virginia's power. She unclenches a hand to stare at the moth's tan wings. It has not yet processed what is to come. She brings it up to her mouth wondering if moths are a delicacy in foreign countries. Then, she blows it away gently like it is nothing more than a fallen eyelash.