

**NOT IN THE MOOD:**  
The Quest for  
a Female Viagra

# VOGUE

FEB

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SEX  
& WHAT  
TO WEAR**

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**EVER AFTER**  
THE AUTHOR AND HER  
HUSBAND AT THEIR  
WEDDING RECEPTION  
AT THE RITZ-CARLTON  
IN BOSTON, 1991.

# LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON

Marcia DeSanctis thought she couldn't live without another, younger man, until her husband proved her wrong. A tale of marital survival. . . .

Sixteen years into my marriage, I fell for another man. For months, I was in crisis, splintering from a heart that shattered in slow motion. I barely functioned as a mother and citizen or, most important, wife. So I turned to the only person I knew who loved me enough to give a damn and was man enough to forgive me: my husband.

Though I considered—even pursued—an extramarital affair, I'd like to think I wasn't a cultural cliché. But in fact, I am probably the emblematic midlife mother of two who wakes up one day and wonders if all of life's mysteries are behind her. I was in my 40s, enduring a daily, robotic cycle of carpooling and cupcakes. I had lived for five years in the professional and literal wilderness, having left New York City and my career as a television producer for rural life with my artist husband. During that time, I wrote a novel about marriage and the sacrifices we make when we decide to commit to one other person in this one life. I began to feel itchy, impatient, a sense that something new might be imminent. When my son turned thirteen, the pinprick of light at the end of the parenting tunnel suddenly turned into a hole the size of a quarter. I started wearing lipstick in the morning. I retired the unkempt ponytail.

I was less aware of the dwindling supply of estrogen left in my body—the female's tragically nonrenewable resource. I knew I had to begin to plan life on the other side of mothering.

Lacking the courage to sell my novel, I decided to go back to school and got accepted to a master's program in international relations. I left that July to plunge into the first of three extended academic residencies—two at Tufts University and one in Asia. The bulk of the curriculum would happen online, in coffee-fueled all-nighters, as I wrote papers on Nigerian terror cells and Argentine banking reforms over one sleepless, invigorating year.

It was while pursuing this degree that I met him.

I have thought a lot about why women stray, and have known plenty who have. Some suffer from a love-sapped marriage; others can't tolerate their husbands but stay with them because of financial necessity or the children. A few want a little midlife sizzle after years of routine sex with the same person. In my case, the explanation was beautifully simple and weirdly complex: I fell in love. It's not that I had a bad marriage; far from it. I have a larger-than-life, hugely talented husband. He makes me laugh, and *up front* >96

## MARITAL MAYHEM

we adore each other. But somehow, this other man—a relief worker with loose trousers and premature crow's-feet—got under my skin.

It snuck up on me. R. seemed an odd sort at first, a Midwesterner stationed in a crisis zone overseas. He didn't much like to hear himself talk, but others did. We sat beside each other in lectures, and I began to feel his gestures—the way he poured his Coke, the delayed smile when he swiveled his head to look at me, the amused flicker in his eye when one of our professors said something insufferable. I started to crave his company because despite all that separated us, we saw the world through a nearly identical lens. I led a busy life, and he lived in war zones, but for both of us, our sense of loneliness was the overwhelming constant. In our class of diplomats, military officials, and businesspeople, I recognized his self-perception as an outsider because I felt like one, too.

OK, it didn't hurt that he was literally feeding starving children. Altruism was an aphrodisiac. He was also not just spare in his lifestyle but in his thinking. I am not sure I have ever met anyone quicker to slice to the essence of things. R. had absolute clarity pondering a macroeconomics conundrum or the benefits of flood relief in Myanmar. I was drawn to his strong opinions, which reminded me of many cocksure journalists I had worked with in my past—the past that was getting farther and farther away from me. We sought each other out—the married housewife and the younger aid worker—with a burgeoning attraction I assumed was mutual, and about which I was stunningly unconflicted. I was away at school, disembodied from my life.

At the end of our first two-week session in Boston, we hugged each other goodbye in the lecture hall. By all appearances it was chaste, but I swore it was loaded with meaning. I was in the throes of nascent unconsummated love, wondering how I could breathe, run a house, or keep up with the impossible course deadlines for the four months until I saw him again in Asia. How would I sleep with my husband when I longed for a man—one I'd never touched—in Africa?

My husband believed my emotional absence was due to the crushing amount of schoolwork. He picked up all the slack, despite the grueling demands of his own work. I was a fraction of a wife as I buried myself in my studies and my infatuation. Like that of Governor Sanford, and probably many other lovesick fools, my relationship with R. gathered steam over E-mail. I slept fitfully, waking early to check the in-box, feeling euphoric when his name was there and despondent when it was not. His writing was sparse, elegant, and full of self-deprecating wit. When he described smoking a cigarette under

a desert cloudburst, he was Hemingway to me, or Graham Greene, every mysterious adventurer framed by solitude in a foreign land. I was sure he pined for me, too, and looked up at the sky, wondering if the earth's tilt or the sun's rays connected us at that very moment.

I planned to be intimate with him when we were reunited. My inevitable betrayal scared me, but nothing—not morality, reason, devotion to my husband and children—could stop me. How simple it was to rationalize my approaching transgression as necessary. Suddenly I believed that life is lived but once and I owed it to mine to be with him. To ignore this romantic love would be a crime I would rue on my deathbed.

I did not consider that R. might not want to sleep with me.

In Asia, we were inseparable. After school hours, in his or my hotel room, we talked about writers Lawrence Durrell and Richard Ford, the careers we still hadn't been brave enough to try, the ways our childhoods helped decide our fates, all the subjects almost-lovers do to milk connection out of every second together. We discussed a thousand what-if scenarios: if we had met at some other point in our lives, if I were not married. We drained the hotel

minibar daily and greeted the sunrise, exhausted, with room-service coffee. But despite some passionate embraces and a few long kisses, there was no physical affair. He explained why: I was someone's wife. We barely touched each other again.

Nevertheless, I galloped toward a future with him. With no logic to speak of, I tried to will him to rethink it, to love me back, to come with me to some imagined place. I knew it was selfish, reckless, and guessed that the cost would be high if he actually reciprocated, but this feeling had made me remarkably nonjudgmental about myself. I assumed he would be similarly unable to deny something so obvious, so powerful. I had given him all the permission in the world to have this affair.

Looking back, I'm sure that I did, in some way, need him. I could see only the gaps in my life, and R. filled all of them in. And there was something else crouching in the back of my mind: If I failed to have this, it would be the end of me as a woman. No doubt something was whispering to me, This is your last chance.

At the end of the master's program, I was chosen by my class to give the commencement address. It was a warm July morning in Boston, and R. was seated right in front of me in his cap and gown, listening. I avoided his eyes, fearing a total breakdown right in the middle of my speech. All the while, my proud husband and children beamed at me from the audience.

After the lunch reception, after all our friends and relatives had left us to gather our things, R. and I faced each other to say one final goodbye. I fell apart. He was returning to the desert, to his work, to the tanned French NGO girls. His life was moving along quickly, but mine had stood still in that hotel room in Asia. Yes, I was returning to a beautiful family, but all I could see ahead was the grayness of my old

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## MARITAL MAYHEM

routine—the same five-mile drive to school, the same grocery aisles—and no R. in my life ever again. He was gone for good. I felt his absence every second of every single day.

Imagine that in many unfaithful marriages, at one given moment, the life of deception becomes unbearable. And so it happened with me. There was a long, agonizing silence, and finally, one day, I received an E-mail from R. After many women I'd heard too much about, he'd fallen hard for someone in Africa. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I crashed nevertheless. And then I did the only thing that seemed proper: I confessed to my husband.

I explained that I loved a man an ocean away, whom I barely knew, who had rejected me before we ever got off the ground. I told him that I needed my best friend to lead me out of this morass, to save me fast. I explained that the only way I could regain my sanity was with his help. Amazingly, he was the one who loved me enough to comfort me, who knew me well enough to clear my head. Only he could explain why this fantasy had demolished me, and only he could make the pain stop. I told him I was sorry, that I couldn't discipline the urges of my flailing heart. I told him that I never stopped loving him all the while, but I'd understand if he kicked me out.

He didn't. Nor did he scream or throw things. Yes, he rolled his eyes; yes, he was irritated and fed up with my moodiness and mooning. But he saw it simply: Our marriage would survive if it was meant to. He loved me enough to see beyond my betrayal and even told me this guy didn't know what he was missing.

He made me see that my erotic obsession was disconnected from our genuine, actual, tactile life. One was in the sky, the other was on the ground, and here on Earth, people loved me back and needed me.

And then, with my husband grasping me, sometimes from a distance, I began to grieve. Like an addict I tried to get through a minute, an hour, a meal. I read Ezra Pound's poem "Camaraderie" a million times, always haunted by the line "Sometimes I feel thy cheek against my face." In two frantic days, I wrote six chapters of a novel about an affair with R.

I slept all day or not at all, and when I was awake, I cried and stared at things out the window. My kids wondered what was wrong, and when I couldn't get out of bed, they stayed out of my way while their father poured their cereal.

And one morning, I woke up and didn't check my E-mails or disaster reports from his war zone. I removed the photo from my wallet, of the two of us deep in conversation. I went downstairs and ate bread and butter. I got dressed.

For my husband, forgiveness was not an act of heroism, or even of complacency, but an instinctive gesture of compassion and the deepest friendship. He owed me that much, he said, and believed we could make it through anything. Fidelity is not to a person, but to devotion and to memory, and

it was not worth giving up easily. He knew that nothing could stop a human heart that was racing out of the gates, even his, and should that happen, he would expect the same dispensation from me.

"I loved him," I said. "I thought I could leave you."

"I know," he answered. "But you can make this easy or make this hard. And it really is much easier to stay."

"Do you feel sorry for me?" I asked. "Just a little? That I got dumped?"

"No," he said. "I feel sorry for you because everything you need is right here, in front of you."

Who can predict each of our capacity for understanding? My husband redefined the parameters of empathy. Maybe he had his own story with some other woman on some other dark night. I can only allow him that, and believe that if so, it has made him love me better. And if

he has wandered, it gave him the flexibility to see through his wife's heartbreak, to know how fleeting her detour would ultimately be. Through it all was his certainty that romantic disappointment—even wedged into the middle of a long, solid marriage—could make me more of a partner, and not less of one.

My husband obstinately believed in the simplicity of commitment, not as default but as an act of will, a decision. We choose to stay in the lives we ourselves have chosen. But he also understood that my ache had been real. It's called life, and no one knows where it's going to take you.

As for R.? I took a deep breath and let him go. □



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