



Before I Get Married

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To my wife, with all my love and devotion.

Before I Get Married

*There were rules. She had to know there were rules, I kept thinking over and over again. The sweat poured from my head as I twirled the engagement ring in between my fingers. My mind kept trying to push out these thoughts by reminding me how beautiful she is. It wasn't working. I leaned over the plywood workbench, and looked in the development tubs. The picture was slowly turning black from overexposure to the chemicals. Plans are hatched and schemes devised in the red light of a dark room, and right then my mind gave in to the bad ideas in the back corner of my brain. As I went over the plan in my head, my body started to tingle. It was that child-like exhilaration that one gets after riding a roller coaster, or opening a gift to find the most sought-after toy of that Christmas season. My mind was overflowing with thoughts that seemed to all be talking at once. Its final words were, *maybe you shouldn't get married, then.**

I could hear the echoes of our friends asking, *when are you two gonna get married*, mixed with her ultimatum, *let's just do it*. Dana was very direct. She knew exactly what she wanted out of life. The house with the white picket fence, 2.5 kids, a border collie, and a professional husband was her lot in life. But, she had, obviously, forgotten our conversation about marriage. She knew damn well that I couldn't marry her.

"The woman I marry has to be someone I can trust," I said. "I could never trust a woman that's had sex with anyone but me."

"Oh yeah, what about you?"

"That's a completely different situation!" I squealed. "Anyone that a man sleeps with before he finds the right woman is incidental. We hold no emotional attachment. Women, on the other hand, are always connected to the people they give their bodies to. It's not a big deal for a man to lose his virginity, but a woman's virginity is sacred and treated thus by the woman."

Dana had to remember this conversation. She knew damn well that I couldn't marry her. But this day, I knew how I was going to make it right, and give Dana everything she ever wanted. I quickly tore down the pictures from the line where they were drying, threw the pile into the

drawer of my workbench, and rejoined the rest of the world.

I kept thinking it all over again as I stood there in the dark. I kept wondering why I was outside his door, and why he should die. This man's crime was fitting of death, his was more than a crime... it was a sin. I could hardly feel the small drips of water from the overflowing gutters above my head, and in the darkness I could see the silhouettes of my girlfriend mixed with police officers in the passers-by. *You're going to get caught*, I kept thinking over and over.

I was startled when I heard the doorknob start to rattle and move. I pulled myself back into the shadows of the house and watched. I watched him walk down the small concrete path to his driveway, slide into his car, and quickly speed away. I knew it was time. I couldn't let him get away. My foot sank into the mud as I trampled through his wife's garden. I sat in my car for a few moments before peeling out of his neighborhood after him. I watched his taillights blink as he twisted and turned through the small, suburban city. His car came to a stop outside the local IGA. I watched patiently as he ran through the rain to the automated doors.

I thought about her lying there, sleeping, as I quietly whispered the suggestions. I made sure I was quiet enough not to wake her, and as days passed, I knew they were working. I made a point of using her past boyfriends' names in our everyday conversation... and... nothing, not even a flinch. One by one she lost recollection of each of the men that had slobbered all over her pristine body. The part of her mind that stored the memories of these sweaty oafs drooling and licking, sucking and fucking, was slowly giving way to my suggestions. For months I would whisper, and with each passing day another man would slip away from her forever. I could see the blank looks in Dana's face when I mentioned, not just the first names of her past lovers but their last names as well. It was the most aggressive project I had ever undertaken, and I was thrilled that it was working exactly to plan.

It was inevitable. The day came when my project ran straight into a brick wall. I sat down at the dinner table. Dana had that something-interesting-happened-to-me-today look of anticipation for my usual *how was your day?* I asked anyway. She told me about her chance meeting with Brian Thompson. I could see the reminiscence in her eyes. She could remember his tongue as it prodded and sucked on her virginal places. She looked across the table at me with a look of astonishment. "For the longest time, today, I couldn't remember his name." My heart made a sudden jump out of my stomach as I planned for the sleepless night full of quiet suggestion. She would forget him.

As I bathed in the red light of the darkroom, I could feel the anger rising in my head. A small, piercing ring started at the back of my head and made its way into my temples. I could feel the pulsing of my jugular veins. I looked down at the black overexposed piece of paper. Like any other, I pulled it from the chemicals and hung it to dry. I think she asked where I was going as I got into my car.

He quickly jumped in his car with the armful of groceries, and sped back to his house with the white picket fence, beautiful wife, well-behaved kids, and beagle. I stared from my car window as he ran for the front door. There was no use putting off the inevitable. I reached to the glove compartment and wrapped my hand around the .45. It was cold, and I could feel the cold run straight up through my arm. I felt the weight of the bullets in the gun I had never loaded before now. I walked to the door, and, like a door-to-door gun salesman, I rang the doorbell.

It seemed like I had walked for hours, my blood spattered clothes concealed under the long raincoat. Policemen passed by, not knowing that I had the .45 in my pocket. The ringing was still in my ears and I could feel myself trying not to hate Brian for fucking my soon-to-be fiancé. I could feel his blood soaking into my body under the coat and begin to pulse into my veins. I could feel my tongue, as his, sliding up and down her high-school physique. I could hear her squeals. I could feel her first orgasm rub and pulse against my stomach. The police sirens woke me from my daze. I could see them heading in the direction of his house. I started back towards my car parked, conveniently, five blocks from the

crime scene.

Another month of quiet nighttime suggestion passed, and it was starting to take its toll on me. I was only getting about three hours of sleep a night. I felt like my body was going to give out from exhaustion. I fought it off thinking about the day when Dana would wake up and realize that I was the only man she had ever been with. She would be a virgin once more. These thoughts kept my project going. They kept me hidden as I staked out her ex-lovers' houses, waiting for just the right moment to erase them forever from her memory. By the end of the month, I had made visits to Philip and John. Dana never saw the obituaries of her ex-lovers, and even if she did, the names wouldn't have registered.

Allen was Dana's first love. It was another month before I could start asking her about Allen, and see her stare back at me as if I'd made the name up. His hold on Dana was strong. I became increasingly more frustrated as days would pass without her recognizing his name, then, all of a sudden, she would blurt out his name connected with some romantic memory. I could feel the hair on the back of my neck stand on end every time she would mention his name. I would work harder at night, only getting an hour or half-hour of sleep, trying to force him out of her head. Finally, one morning at breakfast I recounted one of the more romantic memories she had of Allen... nothing. She looked at me as if I'd gone mad. I nearly fell out of my chair when I realized that it was over. The sleepless nights had come to an end, almost. There was still one small detail that had to be cleared up.

I watched as Allen's wife left the house. I had been outside his house for three consecutive nights waiting for her to leave. I knew this was my only chance at finishing what I had started. The air was exceptionally dry that night. I could taste the fertilizer freshly placed by the lawn company that the home's association had hired. I looked up and down the rows of smart little houses all surrounded by lush, green lawns. Across the street an automatic sprinkler started to whiz and whir to life. I walked up to the door, carefully placing each footstep on the ornamental stepping-stones with the kids names etched into them. I felt the .45 weighing down my pocket, and a slight grin started at the corner of my mouth. I rang the doorbell. I could hear Allen's heavy footsteps as he

made his way to the door. Without even looking through the peephole, I heard the dead-bolt click and the door start to open. I raised the gun about chest-high. I never heard the pop of the gun, but I remember laughing as the blood spread across his chest. I danced off his porch out onto his lawn. My laughter was insane. It was over! Finally, over! Dana was finally mine!

I sit in the darkroom. Dana bought me a nice office chair to relax in while I watched the pictures dry, but I could never use it. Instead, I just push my body further into the corner and look at all the pictures of her and her past lovers turned black from overexposure to the chemicals. I start to remember the sounds each of them made, or what they said, when I pulled the trigger of the .45. I can see behind the blackness of the pictures. I see them all laughing. They know I can never get rid of them. They know that I still see them at night. I can feel their small spatters of blood, soaked into my body, dancing in my veins. I can feel Brian grabbing at my ankles as I turned to get away, or Philip latching onto my body as if he were going to hold me there until the police arrived. John just fell straight backwards, and Allen was so surprised he just stood there. I was already in my car by the time he hit the ground. I can hear Dana coming closer to the darkroom door. I know she can see the light on above the door telling her that I'm working. I reach up to the counter and grab the small ring box. I stand up and start to take down the black paper. I wonder if she'll say, "yes."

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