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In Praise Of Contempt

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In Praise of Contempt

I buy the ice cream cone because I want a cold treat, but by the time I hit the underpass on my way west out of town the heat has cracked off the chocolate dip, folding it into my mouth, and what's left underneath is a white phallus, tongue-slicked into perfect shape. I grin. And deep-throat it. The way I do. The way I always have, since I first did by accident on the train out of Chicago some time in middle school, heading back to the suburbs, sitting next to my suited father in the ill green light of the Metra. I slid the long cone of cream deep into my soft mouth and drew it slowly out. I licked around and around and around its sides, plunged it back in. Then my father leaned over to hiss at me, "Stop, the businessmen are staring."

"What," I said. And I meant it, for an instant. Then I felt the color draw into my cheeks. And looked around. What I was tasting was so sweet.

West out of town means the Tucson Mountains, parabolas of dust and cliff. Out here, the warm pavement crumbles to gravel. The car bends through the last dusty strip malls and pops up over a ridge of saguaro cacti. White ice cream drips down my hands; I lick my fingers. I lick at the soft bow of flesh between my fingers; I lick my sticky palm.

This is what happens when I've just had sex for the first time in a while: I get lit. My body will not shut up, wants more. I've come to the desert to concentrate, to read a book I needed to finish weeks ago. I've got to get out of the house, because we know what happens when a girl stays in the house.

What always has.

What always has since I became friends with Lexi Alexander in the sixth grade, since we spent summer nights in the air-conditioned cold of her parents' basement office signed into AOL chat rooms. She taught me to "cyber," to type dirty things, to give dirty and get dirty in return, whoever it was out there, who they said they were, or maybe not.

A/S/L? we asked. *Age, sex, location?* Were these really men with pants at their knees, or were they middle-school boys like we were middle-school girls, tittering, crossing our legs?

It was my favorite thing. The guttural clicking and grinding sound of the modem as it struggled to connect. The way we pretended to be just

pretending. There was a language I was learning there. Once my parents got a second landline and I had my own AOL account, Aryn sent me a picture of six, seven middle-aged men, their faces red, their dicks out, and one slender woman lying beneath all those hard cocks. Cocks in her hands and mouth and cunt. And after I'd looked and looked and looked, I went downstairs to one of the poles that held up the basement ceiling, and I held myself up by the crossbar and slid myself along the pole until I got *that* feeling. Pumping, my legs wrapped around the concrete.

It was a wildness in me, the way I needed this, the way I went back again and again. There was a magnet in my body that drew pleasure toward it.

But listen, I've lied; this did not start then. This started so early there is no start. I've been humping things as long as I've been conscious.

Yesterday I fucked a married man. Have I graduated? He is a military intelligence officer.

At my favorite trailhead, the mountains round and swoop like a woman lying on her side. Cliffs drop off her back. The only sound is the high-pitched worrying of Gambel's quail in the brush.

I ditch my car, the only one in the lot, and follow the dry wash a few curves into the canyon. There's a shelf in the rock about six feet up that I clamber to, taking out a dewy water bottle. For hours, I read, heat radiating up into my belly through the rock. A few people pass with their dogs, paws crashing into the sand. The light shifts, goes warm against the cliff walls. Then the light goes down.

At some point, I text the man I have just fucked, who is on a training base two hours away. Yesterday, you could not have told me to drive an hour or two for sex. It is the end of the school year, when papers are due and my grading stack piles up, and I'm leaving the country in a week. Yesterday, I would have said I was busy. Now, I am texting the offer to drive halfway, saying we could get a hotel room or fuck somewhere in public. I take a deep breath, put the phone away.

In the dark, the owls hoot at each other from opposite sides of the canyon. I can see one settle onto the crown of a saguaro, then swoop, big wings outstretched, to the next. A black whoosh. A bulk of a shadow. Backlit by the moon, I can see how she leans forward to hoot, flipping her tail feathers down for balance. Her body rocks when she hoots, *hoo-HOO*. My phone buzzes. The Military Intelligence Officer's wife isn't sure right now, he says. She is in Georgia, the last place they were stationed. She thinks she doesn't want him to have sex with any-

one again until she can. I feel myself slump in disappointment, or maybe desperation. Not about him in particular but for the sex, this brief burst of pleasure. The day before, I'd made him come too quickly by bucking.

These hips don't lie, etc.

He sends me a picture of his penis, draped flaccid onto his eased-down athletic shorts: a consolation prize.

"Enjoy that while it's out for me," I tell him.

The thing about this man is, I don't really even like him. At lunch the day before, at a downtown restaurant where we sat by the long glass windows and slowly ate salads, I actually thought I might kill him. He was one of those people who had to be right. He talked a lot. He had a funny half-smile he used when he said inflammatory things, as though his being cute, being gap-toothed, could take me off my intellectual guard. Everything I said he needed to tweak, to correct. The bizarre opinions he held are not of importance here. I became blank and drank a lot of water. I tried to determine whether or not, once he shut up, the sex would be good.

I did not invent the Hate Fuck, which makes me feel better about this.

At that point, it had been just over two months since I'd had sex. This was not the worst sex drought I've experienced. Not by far. Still, I admit an edge of desperation. There is a kind of madness that sweeps over me when I have been celibate between six and eight weeks, an irritating, distracting hunger, a skin need. It becomes nearly impossible to get my work done. I sometimes pay for a massage, just to feel someone's hands on my body. If the buildup reaches five months, I begin to make terrible decisions.

So while a younger, more romantic version of myself might have walked out, I waited. Online, our exchange had been marked by clear communication, the directness I prefer. It seemed entirely possible the sex itself would be good, and that was the point. Not lunch. One's lunch-conversation skills do not appear to be particularly correlated with one's skills in the sack.

Besides, this is how it goes now. The single men my age are picked over. The ones on the websites whom I meet for a drink are disagreeable, unattractive. I wonder if this is how I am viewed, too, on the cusp of thirty. I joke with my friends that I won't get to date seriously again until the first round of divorces.

In the meantime, I seem to be star pickings for married men. The ones who've been with their partners ten years or more, who stopped sleeping with each other, or who almost broke up out of infidelity. For

these couples—working out their definitions of openness, cracking their relationships to accommodate sex in new ways—I am something of a unicorn. Willing to sleep with men with wives. Willing to step into these secret arrangements, intended to infuse new energy into old patterns. Willing to replace, for all of us, what has quietly slipped away.

Some of my friends give me horrified looks when I say the word “married.”

This particular married man, monitored by no less than the United States government, gave me a fake name online, used a fake town. His picture, though certainly him, looked like a different him. Mildly irritating, but I understood. “If the military finds out you’re having extramarital relations, you lose your job,” he told me.

“Even consensual?” I said.

“Yeah, they consider everything an affair,” he said.

“Like a Don’t-Ask-Don’t-Tell for straight people,” I said.

Which is to say that my friends are not the only ones who conceive of marriage as an immutable thing. An immutably *monogamous* thing.

Some of them shake their heads, saying, “I could never.” Meaning they could never do what I am doing. Others narrow their eyes and ask how I know, definitively, that the second person in the marriage has really consented to the arrangement. Often, the wife’s accompanying profile on OkCupid provides reassurance. Sometimes it’s the way a man answers these questions—the specificity of his answers.

With the anonymity of the Internet, though, it’s frankly more likely a married man simply wouldn’t tell me he’s married. So in some way, I tell my friends, the fact that he even brings up his wife is a tally in his favor.

Which is all beside the point. What makes people more nervous, I think (even with the wife’s consent squared away), is the foundation of such a relationship. To sleep with men already committed to someone else is to affirm our right to sexual pleasure. There can be no other rationale. To fuck a man who cannot vow his emotional support, who will not meet one’s family, who may not even be a friend, nods to the primacy to the body. To the body’s set of needs beyond our systems of morality. The needs exist whether we are married or not, although I think many of us like to believe that exchanging “I do”s will somehow shift this essential nature. It does not. And if I am not encountering men I want to commit to—if the men before me are simply not those who echo back the life I am building, and if I believe that as a body I need and deserve sex—a married man is no different from any other.

What I did like was his thighs, stocked with muscle, and the light hair barely visible beneath the collar of his shirt. What I liked was that gap

in his teeth. He paid the check. And after that, when he caught my hand in a public park on the way back to our cars, when he leaned over and gently kissed me, when he asked me where I would like to go, tilting his head, something trembled inside me. I took him to my house.

Back in the wash, night settles. Owls. The flutish, descending song of canyon wrens. Stars brightening. The rock ledge, radiating heat. Bats flutter over the wash. Some bird makes a kind of vibrating sound, high-pitched, almost electronic. Then my phone buzzes. It is a picture of his erect cock.

There are two stories here, one in which I get wet in a canyon and lie down on the warm rock and slip my fingers into my swollen self, or one in which I watch the owls. Both stories are true, although perhaps both can be exaggerations, too—stories I tell to characterize myself for different audiences. For between those afternoons in Lexi's finished basement and this buzzing cell phone, I have been many different people.

The owls, in some way, represent the life I wanted as a young woman, a sort of quiet existence, romantic and velvet-dark, in which sex was a component of love. In which sex was *making love*, unfurling quietly and slowly, with meaning, on thin air mattresses beneath the stars.

How does one go from this sweetness to the woman who fucks married men she does not much like? I can only say that first, it went the other way. How did the cybering girl become so sweet, locked down? Culture had its way with me. The girl who loved cybersex did not go anywhere but inside, hidden behind heavy layers. For years, I could sense sex moving inside me, giant and hot, pulsing against the gates, and I did my best to put it away—through judgment, through restriction, using *No* as my measure of success. This, I know, is an old story. But what is buried sears its way through. If I go back to the beginning, none of this is surprising.

We assume these things do not go together, the owls and the fingers wandering south, but as Sallie Tisdale writes, "the planet itself is laden with sex, marbled with my physical and psychic responses to its parts, made out of my relationship with its skin." She says, "How we are rooted to the earth through our bodies determines how we see other bodies, and ultimately the earth itself." What I think Tisdale means is that the romantic pleasure I take from this dusk—the depth of my presence, the sharpness of the details I take in—is not at all different from the way I enjoy my own body, the bodies of others. Which is to say, I am no less romantic than I used to be—only more openly other things, too.

On the hike out, I walk with my headlamp off, fumbling by starlight. Even with my bad knee I can pick my way through the sand over the rock. In the side pocket of my hiking pack, my phone buzzes. He came.

I was not raised by swingers or prostitutes, but by Midwestern Methodists sincere in the idea that sex is appropriate only in the context of marriage—or at the very least love. To be fair, my parents, married for more than thirty years, are the kind of couple who make this seem easy. Growing up, my parents kissed in front of us. They spoke gently. They laughed. They compromised, each of their lives fashioned in balance with the other's. As a teenager, a friend of mine—whose parents fought bitterly—confessed that my parents alone were her model for a healthy love.

Still, I have begun to wonder whether my parents' devotion to the sincerity of sex was perhaps just what they believed to be the correct parenting line. No doubt it was an ethics supposed to prevent my own pain and confusion. Perhaps like any good parents, they hoped to usher their daughters, three of them in total, through young adulthood without the kind of mess that sex can inspire—a stew of self-esteem concerns, infection, and potential pregnancy. For this, I cannot fault them.

But as a grown-up I've begun to hear stories, and I'm realizing that even my parents likely diverged from love-based sex at some point. Why, then, steer me so intensely toward the idea of abstinence until marriage? Were their own sexual experiences outside wedlock negative? Have they, afterwards, categorized them negatively because they feel like they're supposed to, while attending to the memories privately with nostalgia or a wry amusement? I wonder how many of us are pretending we fit, holding publicly to conventional moral standards, while pursuing (or stumbling into) our true interests. As Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá discuss in *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships*, if we all pretend we don't have—or want—sex outside the common narrative, the common narrative remains: as a thick, muscled force that makes people question their desires, their “normalcy.” How damaging this is depends on the way someone experiences such secret desires, the way they judge their own ability (or inability) to deny such cravings. Years ago, I carried a toxic shame, spitting hot judgment at others out of my anger toward myself. While of course there are those who truly want what's considered “normal,” those people are not me. And so it is critical to me that I honor these desires, that I fumble my way toward them. I learn how this works; I find my way into strange spaces with strange men. I set

my own boundaries, I check my intuition. And in the end, I get myself quite happily fucked.

The wife changes her mind. We meet halfway, at the Shell station beside the main junction of a tiny town. When I pull up next to his red car, he looks over, grins. We meet in the space between our cars and kiss like we love each other. He taps his pelvis into mine.

“There’s law enforcement all over this town,” he says when he pulls back. “Border patrol, sheriffs . . . could actually be hard to find a spot.”

“We could try for a pullout somewhere,” I said. “These are rural roads.”

“Could,” he says. He shrugs. Then he glances into the back of my car. “Oh, your seat’s even down,” he says. “Your car may be dirty, but it’s got more room. You have a blanket.”

“I do, indeed, have a blanket,” I say. I grabbed it because I had a feeling this would happen.

“Dirty, but with character,” he nods.

We head south in my station wagon, around the bend from the pizza place, through the bulk of the vineyards. The grasslands are shining a sharp white in this dry season, in this late afternoon light. He’s telling me why he’s hung over this time. It seems he’s always hung over. He tells me about all the military guys razzing this one other guy, who’s into Jesus, who’s into monogamy. They were telling him he should find some sluts with them tonight, because there’s things you can do with those sluts that you wouldn’t want to do with your wife because you’d degrade her. They were kidding, he says; they just wanted a rise out of this guy—but I kind of hate him for even joking like this. The words roll a little too easily off his tongue. The Jesus guy, he said, left with two “morbidly obese” women. “Someone’s gonna have a guilt hangover tomorrow,” he sings. I laugh hollowly. I focus on the road.

If I were true to one part of myself, I couldn’t be true to another part. Which is to say, if I want to fuck this man in five minutes, it’s a good idea to be amenable.

We turn onto a few dirt roads, thinking we’ll pull over, but they deliver us to someone’s house. We turn back. We try again. We coast one rise after another, trying to calculate the likelihood of traffic. The car chatters over washboard. The main thing is, we don’t want to get arrested.

He is my first married man, or the first I have actually fucked. The others, professors and post-docs in the earth sciences, caught me at a particularly tender time, when I craved partnership and love too much.

We went on long, meandering dates, sometimes awkward, in which I drank Irish coffees late at night and tried to decide whether or not there was chemistry as the men scooted closer to me near the bar. And if there was chemistry, I had to ask myself if I could swallow the fact of the wives. Sometimes I could not.

You understand, to connect to them too much was dangerous. They were married men. I build dikes around the edges of my own desire, to direct the waters: these suitable candidates for love, these not. The ideal was always that someone would be Such A Good Friend, while also containing some disqualifying factor. Something to steady the heart. The ideal was that once the dynamics were established, I wouldn't have to worry about things growing the wrong direction.

More often, though, I allowed myself to sleep with men for whom I felt just the right level of contempt. Some combination of flaring arousal and disgust. Men with whom I could chat *enough*, men with whom I could laugh *enough*. Men about whom I could say, "Of course not!" to my friends, and still fuck the shit out of them.

Contempt is not a word we like. Contempt means disregard for, disrespect for. Contempt finds one beneath consideration. Contempt finds one deserving of scorn.

To act out of contempt initially inspired self-loathing, a warm, sickening rush of shame. Even as someone leaned in to kiss me, I was dismissing them, and this seemed unforgivable, I think because I bought into the idea that there are only two kinds of relationships in this world: those grounded in a sort of perfect love, and those that are not (that should, accordingly, be disbanded immediately, or hastily cleaned up, atoned for).

Now, I see that even my friendships contain moments of distance. I do not mean to say that the contempt we contain, which flares in us, need always be visible to others or acted upon, but I do know that its existence can be of use. The kind of contempt I am praising is but a sliver, a powerful small thing, which holds a space, preventing inappropriate enmeshment. (Too much contempt, of course, and one simply does not call.)

These men, too, dismiss me. If our relationship is to be just sex, they necessarily must acknowledge what I am not. Contempt is a marker of the kind of situation where such a delicate balance is possible. If not the foggy risk of love, the creeping risk of hate. In a body such as mine—insistent, hungry, clear in its requests—if I am to have sex more than once a year, I will inevitably be confronting one or the other of these potential imbalances.

What is easy to forget is the way bodies grow tenderness. We like to think that humans arrive at a kiss only when tenderness is already present, grown from emotional encounters or situational closeness. But in fact a kiss can grow tenderness, as though from a seed. Do not confuse the presence of contempt with the absence of kindness. With men like this one, especially. The tenderness of the body calms my reactivity toward him. It draws a kind of sweetness out of us, it builds an intimacy from our very tissues. From the touch of mouth to neck, from hand to hip. We lie together afterwards, leg over leg, and laugh about small things, relieved, drawn into mutual sweetness.

We fuck with a tender contempt. Or we fuck tenderly, and contempt mediates.

We climb over a rise, and then, what I want to see: a Forest Service sign. I have a right, like any American, to fuck on public land. I pull the car over. Its front faces a ranch with a big two-story cabin-style house. He seems nervous. I am thrilled.

I'd pictured us making out outside the car in the wind, to build more heat, but he wants to get right into the hatchback. I acquiesce, stepping out of my cowboy boots, spreading the blanket onto the scratchy gray floor of the folded-down seats.

I lean down, to slip open his buttons with both hands and mouth.

He fucks me in the hatchback. It has to be a hundred degrees in there, the sun pouring through the windows. Sweat pools in gray drops on his forehead. Only one falls on me before he brushes them away with the back of his hand. Our bodies slide around on each other. I hold his hips against me. Finally his face clenches. It is over. The windows of the car are fogged. "Like *Titanic*," I say, moving like I'll run my hand down the wet window, and he rolls his eyes.

"If you'd said that during, I'd have killed you."

We crack the doors. Fresh, cool wind pours over our bodies. We are dry in moments.

"It's so nice not to have to put in extra effort," he says as we drive back to town. And I laugh.

"Yes," I say. He puts his hand on my thigh.

I could have used an orgasm, but I don't actually care. I'm leaving the country at the end of the week; his training will end, and he'll move to Seattle. I suspect we'll never see each other again. I love that this does not concern me.

On the way home, I buy jalapeño chips at the Shell station and crunch loudly on them while I drive. I lick my fingers and absorb the salt. I feel delicious. I feel amazing. The whole valley is coated in perfect desert light, the high rolling hills covered in a white sheen.