

PERFECT

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Lately Josie's been putting the screws to me. Sometimes it's a subtle little I'm-gonna-slide-this-information-into-the-conversation-and-see-if-he-blinks kinda thing. Other times it's an out and out, "HEY, LISTEN UP BUSTER, I'M TALKIN' HERE," kind of deal. It's about love, that's what it is. Who the hell ever gets enough of it? I know I don't. I didn't in my marriage and from everything she's told me, I'm sure Josie wanted more than she got.

Josie calls it her cavern of unmet needs. This is good for me to visualize 'cause I see myself on the lip of a cliff, high atop a backhoe, grinding the gears, teetering on the edge, working and sweating, half-covered in dust trying to fill the damn thing up.

I can't of course, no one on earth can. This is a point of friction with us. A bone of contention.

Her kids went to California with her ex and my ex took our boy camping so Josie and I got to spend some "unsupervised" time together last week. Sleepovers and things. With and without the jammies. Waking up snuggling her warm cheeks is about as close to heaven as I'm going to get these days.

I don't know what it is about sex. It seems to be both perfect union and the doorway to a million misunderstandings. We've been having electrifying, soulful, connected sex. We've also been having angular eruptions and emotional fractures and fissures as well. The kind of stuff where one of us will say something and the other will feel pounced on and mistreated. Then the one who said the trip-wire thing will pout, withdraw, and start to worry about saying anything at all.

Sometimes I feel like one of those guys in the army with a mine detector. Feeling his way over dangerous pastures and broken roads.

She slept over on Saturday and we made love in the afternoon after one of our close call boy-we-nearly-stepped-on-it-this-time episodes. It was wonderful. We made a leisurely dinner, talked, went to bed and made love again.

She fell asleep in my arms. I woke up to pee in the middle of the night and to my surprise Josie was nowhere in sight. I found her on the couch in the living room. I figured I kept her up snoring or thrashing around in bed and went back to sleep.

When I got up in the morning I made coffee and asked her about it. She said she was upset with me and needed to distance herself. "Cause I get too needy," she said with a frown. "I start to want all these things and I know I'm not going to get 'em."

"Like what?" I ask, thinking about the backhoe.

"Like you telling me you love me."

"Oh," I said, handing her her coffee, "that."

Truth is, I am a little skittish about the whole I-love-you business. I feel it in my bones, and I behave in loving ways with Josie. I don't have any trouble telling my son I love him when he's drawing a picture of a volcano and I lean over, smooth his unkempt curls and smell and kiss his head. My son doesn't have to reciprocate. He doesn't have to lift a finger. He doesn't even have to look at me. I'm reassured. I'm standing on a rock in an ocean of love. My faith is unshakable.

I've talked about this a number of times with Josie. What we agree on is, she needs to hear it and I need to be able to say it or not say it. I guess I've brought the shattered pieces of my former marriage to this relationship I have with her.

Jen and I were married twelve years. I did my damndest to fill her heart and bones to the brim with unconditional love. I was determined to make it work. Somehow my efforts were always half a cup for her. If only I'd tried harder, jumped higher and stepped up to the damn plate. I think Superman, Jesus Christ and Buddha would've had their work cut out for them.

It doesn't do me a damn bit of good to rag her down though, what's done is done. We're done and I'm not sorry. I cried and tried and cried. I reached a saturation point with the marriage. Like a towel that falls in the water. At some point it can't get any more soaked. That's how I got—soaked to the bone. When I knew that my best just wasn't good enough, I was free. Like a hollow reed in the bitter wind rattling in the cattails at the edge of a frozen lake. All raw, achy and lonesome. Free, alone and lonesome.

Anyway, I'm taking it slow with Josie. I no longer have any desire to turn myself into Zamora, the triple-jointed wonder, the Human Pretzel or Lon Chaney, the man with a thousand faces. If this one doesn't please you darlin', how-about *this* one. How about a beard, a moustache, dark glasses, a shaved head? What if I stand on my head and sing the Star Spangled Banner? I don't think so, I just don't think so.

Josie called on Tuesday night. I finished my dinner, a salad pulled fresh from the garden. It was one of those rare summer evenings where the temperature was just right, with a little breeze to lift the air out of the doldrums. The sun rippled through the trees at the edge of the pasture across from my place. I took the phone out on the deck and we talked.

She told me about her day. Work politics. Ass kissers and manipulators. Controlling managers and overworked peasants. Then we got to the juicy stuff. We talked about our weekend and her sleeping on the couch.

She started nudging me about the I-love-you stuff. My neck and shoulders began to tense up. I felt backed into a corner. I explained my position on our I-love-you conundrum and found myself slipping on smooth rocks in a rushing creek bed. My voice rose and became sharper. There is some-

thing relentless in Josie when she gets this way. She kept after me; pursuing, prodding, poking.

Finally I said, "OK, OK. I can't fill in all the blanks for you. I can't make whatever didn't work out in your marriage all cozy and comfortable right here and now. I want you to listen for a few minutes, that's all. Then you can talk 'til your heart's content and I'll listen back. I want you to try to imagine that this is perfect."

She was silent.

"And that you and I are immersed and dissolved in perfection." I surveyed my unkempt, weed-choked yard strewn with my boy's supersoaker water gun, empty plastic flowerpots and a high-priced worthless trike he'd outgrown and hardly ever used.

"This is it babe. This is perfect with us on the phone, the sun going down and your teenage daughter pissed at you 'cause you're going out with me. It's perfect with Sam's toys all over the living room, the carpet stains I can't seem to get rid of and that persistent cat piss odor left over from the previous owners lax attitude about kitty hygiene that hangs over my couch like a ghost. This is it—the top of Mount Everest," I said, studying the weathered top of my deck that could use another coat of oil. "We're lucky if we get to see each other once a week. Damn *right* we're lucky. I'm standing and you're breathing. How lucky can you get? We've got our sorrows and our tears, you and I. We both had kids with somebody else and we're surviving. We're working long hours and we're muddling through. We're supervised by inconsiderate, revved-up bosses stressed about the bottom line. We're paying too much for small, sagging houses. My lawn needs a mow and the blackberry bushes are threatening to take over my apple tree. I'm tired and so are you. And you know what else?"

"What?" she said.

"We've been in love for a long time. You and me and the red-tipped, green lettuce leaves. The crows cawing and nesting nearby. That tall pine in your back yard with the hammock swaying peacefully beneath it. Dandelions ringing my rock garden. Your girl falling asleep in your arms and my boy waking up and clutching a quarter the tooth fairy left him in the night. We've melted in hot showers, you and I. I've been lost in space when I've held your hand. Taken a walk in the stars when I've kissed your neck and smelled the faint lavender soap and sweat mixed there. I've been transported who-knows-where by your kisses and been to the moon and back from just a sidelong, happy glance from your blue-grey eyes. I've been extinguished how many times when we've made love? Who can count them? Who would want to? And I've come back to my body dazed, wondering where I've been. Back to being a separate guy in a chaotic world. Back to business as usual."

I could hear her breathing.

"Back to being a man on the phone who will go to bed alone tonight. Might even think of

his sweetheart falling asleep next to her skinny, bony daughter. The one that flails around in the middle of the night and wants to crawl in your skin.

“You’re right,” she said and sighed. “I slept on the couch so I wouldn’t have to do this.”

“You *don’t* have to do it. You can dis-engage any time you want. So can I. That’s the price we pay for love. Living wages, the high cost of living. It’s scary as hell to stand up in the blast furnace of love without a stitch on. No protection. Nothing to lean on. I’m scared too.”

“If you’re not scared you’re probably a saint, or crazy, or just plain out of it,” she said. “I lived with a man who freaked out whenever we got too close. When things were going great and we had harmony and a solid foundation under us, he’d find a way to disrupt it and turn over the tables. I studied the heck out of it for years and couldn’t figure it out. Finally, I realized, I don’t *have* to be able to analyze it. Just let it be what it is.”

“Let a loser be a loser,” I said.

“That’s good. I’m gonna write that down. Put it on my refrigerator until I have it memorized. Maybe even make a t-shirt out of it.”

“Listen,” I said, “I’ve gotta go. I think my ear’s gonna fall off or else I’m gonna have to see about getting a phone surgically attached to it. Are you feeling any better?”

“Yes. Thanks for the pep talk. I hear you. I *needed* to hear you.”

“I guess I have to say this stuff until I’m blue in the face. ’Night lover.”

“Good night.”

I sit down on the grass in front of the deck. I study the wide swath of blackberries marching across the edge of my property. I bought a student model chain saw last weekend and found out I don’t have an extension cord long enough to reach them. Shit. Another trip to the hardware store. I lie back and feel the dry grass stubble poke my back and shoulders. The lumps and contours are uneven beneath me. I set the phone down and look at the sky. The sun is almost gone now save for the tree tops. I see a handful of stars and a half-moon shaped cirrus cloud above a tree. It looks like the tree is supporting it, holding up the curved white cloud.

I’m supported like that cloud with the night before me and the whole world at my back with the grass growing steadily, quietly, relentlessly, right behind my ears.