

CONFESSION

Sylvette Wolfe

I'm not making excuses, Bishop, I'm really not. What I did, it's inexcusable. Reprehensible. I broke sacred vows. I totally crossed the line, and I'm sorry for that. All that stuff. But the thing I honest-to-gosh don't get is why my husband's so hot and bothered about it unless it maybe bruised his big fat little ego. Yes, I told him. A week ago. At first he went all Incredible Hulk on me—eyes bulging, face bloating. From there it was the Grim Weeper: "How could you have done this to me? To *us!*" Meanwhile I'm wondering who's this wonderful fairy tale *us* he's talking about?

No, of course not. That's why I'm here. I'm willing to do whatever to make things right, but I'm a little new to this. You know the parable about the workers in the vineyard? I showed up with the sundown shift, an hour before quitting time. Okay so maybe not quite that late. Twenty years ago next July. The second happiest day of my life except for the fact poor Elder Duncan couldn't quite get me all the way underwater. My toe popped up the first time, my elbow the second, and my hair came loose and surfaced on the third. By the fourth try I was seriously reconsidering, but it all worked out. In the end it all worked out.

So, no, I've never done this before. I guess I never had to until now. Courage? I don't know if it takes courage as much as desperation. And guilt. Lots of guilt. I want to make things right between me and the Lord. George? Well, yes, him too, but we'll get to that. No, this is the second tour for both of us. He lost his to cancer and mine took a permanent French leave—good riddance to bad decisions! What can I

say? The young and the restless and the dumb. I fell in love with Johnny Dangerous my senior year of high school.

So where should I begin? Because in my opinion it's not so much the incident itself as all the stuff leading up to it. It's more like this state of mind that developed over time. And it wasn't so much what he said but what he didn't say. Like whenever he saw me stepping out of the shower or squeezing into a dress or a swimsuit, heaven forbid. "Are you really wearing *that*?" Or: "Hey, when did you graduate to super-size?" Or: "Hey, do you want me to stamp 'Frigidaire' on your hindquarters now or after you dry off?" No, he didn't actually *say* that, but I could see it in his eyes; I could hear it in his voice even when he was saying something else.

The thing is, I know I don't look all that bad, especially for my age if that's a factor. I know I'm not twentysomething smooth. I've got a few more lumps and bumps—I get that. But dressed up in a pencil skirt and heels I'm good enough to get a second look. Maybe a third if it's not a close-up. I look nice. I think I even look, well, desirable. Is that bad, Bishop? Is it a sin to want to be wanted? Because that's the thing, I think, for women at least—maybe it's the same for men too—but once you stop feeling desirable, you're old. Well of course it's just a state of mind, but it's *my* mind and *my* body too. Throw the spirit in there and you've got the whole trifecta. No, but that's the whole point: it's not just physical, but that's part of it. Not all but part. For women, probably a bigger part than men. No offense, Bishop, but I've seen Humpty Dumpty's in Speedos and sunglasses parading around the beach like they owned every girl on it. Not pretty. Certainly not eye candy, if you catch my drift. Women are more discerning, I think. I mean, I get the whole love-me-as-I-am-all-300-pounds-of-it movement. I do. And maybe the whole plus-sized revolution is a good thing. My generation burned the bra; today's kids are junking bathroom scales and tape measures. Sweet freedom!

My point is, I know I'm no spring chicken, but I'm not on life support either. I'm not quite ready for mummification. So it's the little

digs, the unspoken insults, the *attitude*, Bishop, the attitude. I mean, how would you feel if you put your arm around your wife and she twisted away like she's breaking out of jail? Oh, he'll hold my hand in sacrament meeting and take me by the arm and open the car door and do all that chivalrous Sir Walter Raleigh stuff in public. But safe at home I'm invisible. I'm the chef—more like the short-order cook. I'm the laundry lady. I'm another paycheck, although not the big one, but still . . . I get shrugged and shunned and turned away from so often I start believing the rumors in his eyes: I'm fat. I'm ugly. The Colossus of Kern County. Excuse me? Specifics? Sure, here's specific. It's a Friday night, we've just finished a nice dinner, and I sit down next to him on the sofa with a blanket for two. I've got scented candles burning and a DVD on the screen. No, Bishop, it wasn't *Beaches*. Give me a little credit here. But it wasn't *Terminator 3* either. It was a nice little rom-com. Anyway, I spread the blanket over our laps and he doesn't scream "Fire!" and head for the exit, so I'm thinking, well that's progress. It's a step in the right direction anyway. I get braver; I put my hand on his thigh and start to rub a little, trying to generate some electricity, if you know what I mean. I'm sorry. Am I getting too graphic? Too much information? No, I didn't think so. You've heard it all, right? Broken marriages, runaway kids, sex, drugs, the works.

Anyway, George isn't reacting, but he's not giving me a double stiff-arm either, another victory. I get a little more daring, venture a bit higher up the thigh. He throws the blanket aside and says, "I need a drink!" and he's off to the kitchen. "A drink?" I say. I'm wondering if maybe he's having problems in the you-know-what department. They've got plenty of remedies now—pills, shots, all kinds of little inflation tricks. Maybe, but how would I know? It's been so long—look, if that's it, fine! Fine! He should just tell me. Because instead of thinking, *what's wrong with him* I'm thinking *what's wrong with me*?

Anyway, he gets his drink and goes off to bed while I go into the bathroom and have a little moment of truth with the mirror. I take a

cold, hard look at the little saddlebags under my eyes and the extra chin growing on my throat and confess the obvious: I couldn't turn on a light bulb.

So just when I'm about to emotionally retire to the elephant's graveyard, the first day of school some new kid shows up. I say kid, but he's thirty-five, give or take, no tats, no nose rings, clean-cut and sleek-cheeked. He looks like a returned missionary minus the baby fat and the little black badge. He's in the teacher's lounge and he's totally flirting with me and I don't even know it—that's what Barbara Mason the P.E. teacher tells me later. "It was so totally obvious," she says. He's waiting to use the microwave to heat up his little Tupperware of leftovers and so am I and he motions me forward: "Youth before experience," he says. It just happens to be my birthday, the dreaded Six-O, and I don't want people making a big deal out of it with black balloons and Styrofoam headstones on my door but they do anyway. "Congrats on number twenty-nine!" he says. "Oh, right," I say. "Tell it to the man on the moon!" It's such a flagrant line, but I'm loving every syllable of it. When I mention I've got four kids and six grandkids, he says, "Did you get married when you were ten?"

I wave him off, but I'm blushing—like totally blushing, according to Barbara. "Oh you so totally were," she says.

He's a nice kid, a nice man. Like me, he teaches fifth grade and his classroom's just across the hall, so we share kids for compartmentalized teaching: I do English and Social Studies, he does Science and Math. There are joint field trips, joint planning sessions, open house, evening events, and after-school stuff. My husband doesn't move a molecule over these extended hours and excursions. Never protests, never laments the lack of my company. Shrug. Yawn. Bite. Gulp. Swallow. Belch. Pass the remote.

One night after the science fair, everyone pitches in with cleanup—many hands make light work, as the saying goes—and before I know it the gym's vacant, the lights are off, the doors are locked, and it's just

the two of us, although we don't know that yet. I'm tidying up in the supply closet and he's just cut the light in the hall. "Diane?" he calls. "Everything all right?"

"In here," I say and he enters the walk-in closet where I'm standing on top of a stool trying to stack some jars on the upper shelf.

"Hey, that's dangerous," he says.

I turn and smile and say, "I'm fine." But there's something odd in his expression. I'm wearing a skirt and hose and a nice satin top with horizontal stripes that are supposed to visually aggrandize the bust, as if I need aggrandizement. And suddenly I'm wondering if I dressed this way on purpose, but who am I kidding? Lying to yourself is like lying to God: you can't. I know; He knows. Sorry. I guess I'm getting off track again.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, and he smiles like a little kid caught in the act.

"What?" I ask.

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but . . ." And he stops and it's like he's mulling it over whether or not he's going to commit and maybe make a fool of himself, and the whole time I'm thinking, say it, you fool; say it say it say it! And then he does: "You have the most beautiful calves. Like a dancer's."

Now I'm blushing as I step down off the stool and I almost stumble and then I do and he catches me like Superman snatching Lois Lane out of the sky. Or like a groom carrying his bride across the threshold. I smile awkwardly. Then I'm babbling like I'm back in middle school. There's that initial moment of contact where you can either break free and flee like Joseph from Potiphar's wife or you can summon Bathsheba to your bedchamber. And I know this should all stop right here and now and yet I'm also thinking this train may never pass through this old ghost town again. Then I've got the two puppets, Punch and Judy, arguing in my head: yes no yes no yes no; stay go stay go stay go. But he doesn't let me decide. He looks at my eyes like no one else has looked for

longer than I can remember; not like one of my puppy-eyed students or my polite friends for dinner or Brother This or Sister That at church or least of all my husband wondering why leftovers again? Not since the day I knelt at the altar in the LA Temple thinking, yes this is the man I want to walk that timeless, endless path through the eternities with—drunk, Bishop, love-sick drunk with that deep, aromatic mix of love and desire that was going to fuel us through all obstacles, fires, storms, ravages of any brand. And still might have with just a little work and forgiveness and oh my gosh maybe an ounce of imagination. But now in retrospect the biggest surprise wasn't that it cooled but how quickly. Overnight, it seemed.

I know, I know, but Junior's not through. In fact he's just warming up. "And your eyes," he whispers. "The most beautifu—"

The rest I'll leave to your imagination. Let's just say it wasn't like in the movies where I leap into his arms and he slams me against the wall and drills me right there in the hotel lobby, fast and furious, in full view of a thousand security cameras. Not at my age. First, I question the physics of that particular posture. This was soft, slow, gentle, the old-fashioned way. It was delicate and lingering, starting high and working low—not working but delighting so you can actually feel it seeping deep into your blood and bones. A slow free fall and then suddenly he pulls the rip cord! Whoa! Then another fall and—whoa! And another! Whoa! And again!

And the whole thing, it was . . . ecstatic. Yes, ecstatic! Even when the angry little voice in the back seat was screaming, "Stop! Stop! You mustn't do this! You're violating covenants! You're throwing away your eternal inheritance! You are so totally blowing it!" And yet the other voice kept countering: inheritance with who? Time and all eternity with Mr. Frump? Elmer Fudd in slippers and a bathrobe? Every scripture and verse from every Sunday School lesson since my baptism was pounding on my head trying to get in: didn't hear it; didn't feel it; didn't care. The voice I heard was the silence of my husband; the voice I heard was no

and not now and I don't have time and I've got a meeting; the voice I heard was this young man breathlessly celebrating every pre-plowed inch of me, furrowed or fallow. And when I fell into his arms it was like the tolling of cathedral bells. Eternal bells. From the high Alps to the deep deserts. We clung to each other afterwards, the two of us alone on the floor of the walk-in closet, both of us knowing (and me saying over and over) that this would not (must not) ever happen again, yet lingering together for as long as we possibly could—or as long as my bladder allowed, which turned out to be about fifteen minutes.

No, no. Absolutely not. Not an excuse, Bishop, just an explanation. It's my fault, I totally get that. But don't you think there's at least a little bit of blame to share? Can I speak bluntly? Yes, I suppose I already have been. But do *I* have to shoulder all the blame for this while he walks away with a halo over his head? The poor, long-suffering, cuckolded husband diligently going about his church business while I'm tramping around the barnyard? Is that how it goes down? What about equally yoked, as they say, in the honeymoon suite or in the tar pits, equally yoked? Because it's a lonely life, Bishop. It's a lonely life, and we try our best to fill it with other things: kids, church, work, grandkids. Yes! Yes! Exactly! All the while trying to forget this other void that's supposed to be the heart of our eternal happiness. Excuse me? Or relegating it to prohibition? Wow! Interesting take, Bishop. Really interesting take. No, I had no idea. You two look so—so perfect together! I'm so sorry to hear that. Yes, that must be really hard. I can only imagine. I mean, at least I've got my book club.