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Aversion Therapy

You're the lucky sweepstakes winner given a chance to enroll in the revolutionary new aversion therapy program that's been so much the rage this past year or two that only the very rich and the very famous have been able to book treatment times at the fabulously exclusive clinic in Switzerland that is the only place in the world offering the treatment and even then the waiting list to get in is longer than a pleasant Sunday afternoon at home with your wife and kids.

He walked down the street jingling his coins in his pocket and feeling flat and fairly free, not wanting anything, not afraid of anything, not disappointed in anything. One of the good moods. He had been to the cinema and seen a film that he didn't like much and was now heading downtown to do some early Christmas shopping. A short dark-skinned young man came out of a shop doorway and fell into step beside him, asking him in heavily accented English whether he had the time. He held his watch up wordlessly. The man held his wrist lightly, holding it steady while he looked, then thanked him with an unctuous manner that he found almost revolting but not quite, not quite enough to ruin his mood. The man reminded him of a toddler who can't talk yet and so knows that he can't express himself and so does not even try, just lives, just butts into life with his forehead.

"Where are you from?" the little man asked. He was maybe 25 or 30.

"Germany."

"I'm from Senegal. My name is Djilly."

"Nice to meet you, Djilly."

"Do you live here?"

"I'm here for a few months, teaching."

"Oh. I have been here two years. Are you married?"

"No. Are you?"

"Yes. Would you like to see a picture of my wife?"

"All right."

The man pulled out his wallet and fished in it for a dark, smudgy photo of a smiling black woman holding a small baby.

“She’s pretty. Is that your child?”

“Yes. Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Yes.”

“Is she here with you?”

“No.”

“I’m alone here too. Is your girlfriend coming?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.”

“Why would she not come?”

“She has visa problems. This country doesn’t want to let her in, because she is young and unmarried.”

“They are afraid she will marry someone here and stay forever, yes?”

“They are afraid she is a prostitute sent here by the mafia in her country.”

“Where is she from?”

“Belarus.”

“Where is that?”

“Between Poland and Russia. The name means White Russia.”

“Like the drink?”

“Like the drink.”

“Do you think you could spare some change? I have no money and I need to call my family in Senegal.”

He reached in his pocket, pulled out a 500 peseta coin, put it in the unctuous young man’s outstretched hand.

“Thank you,” the young man said, “but do you think you might spare some more?”

He reached in again and took all the coins that he had been jingling and put them in the young man’s hand.

“Thank you so very much,” the man said, beetling his brows in a rather ineffectual attempt at signaling his gratitude facially. “How old are you?”

“Forty-five.”

“You look much younger. You have a little white in your beard but you have a young face.”

“Thank you.”

“Good luck to you and your girlfriend. I hope she is successful to get a visa.”

“Thank you.”

“Thank you.”

You arrive with your bags and your hopes and your fears and register for the treatment and the press is there and they interview you and the flash bulbs pop and the reporters scribble furiously and the director of the clinic shakes your hand for the cameras and the hoi polloi look on enviously and you're shown to your suite which is more luxury than you've seen except in the movies and a kindly old scoutmaster has just built a roaring fire in the fireplace for you and a twinkly plump mother in a house dress has just run you a hot bath with your favorite bath oils and is standing by the bath tub splashing her fingers in the water a little making sure the temperature is just right when you walk in wearing a soft fluffy bathrobe you found in the closet and you unbelt it and drop it on the floor and climb carefully into the bath and she washes you all over even your genitals and it isn't sexual at all it's just very sweet as if you were five years old again and you spend the evening eating an exquisite dinner in your room by the fire and watching a classic black-and-white film on TV and then go to sleep between satin sheets.

He spent an hour or two shopping, bought a few CDs and books and a little stainless steel dog standing up very straight on its hind legs. After that he was hungry, so he stopped into a tapas place and had six or seven helpings or bites or toothpicks or whatever you wanted to call the units in English — each was a little something stuck to a small piece of bread with a toothpick, and when you were done they charged you 125 pesetas for each toothpick on your plate — and three beers, and then decided to go over to his girlfriend's place.

His girlfriend was Ukrainian but had lived here for ten years. He had met her at a restaurant after a public lecture he had given on images of Spain in American literature. The dean who had invited him paid for his dinner. A bunch of teachers who had been at his lecture came along. Diana had been the person sitting next to him, on his left. They hadn't talked much, because so many of the other people at the table wanted to ask him questions, but they had exchanged a few words and a few glances. He had felt her presence very strongly all through dinner. Afterwards the others had drifted off but she had sort of hung around and they had ended up walking out together. They had walked to the Plaça de Catalunya and down the Rambla together, not talking much, just strolling. Stopped and watched the mimes in their outlandish costumes, pretending to be someone they weren't, sometimes pretending to be statues, standing stock-still for fifteen, twenty minutes. They were so good, some of them, that you couldn't tell whether they were alive.

She lived in the Barri Gotic, the gothic quarter, the old city, a few blocks off

the Rambla to their left. Their steps just sort of took them there. She probably guided him, wandered off to the left side of the street and he followed, but he didn't notice it happening. She didn't ask him up. She just put her key in the big ornate wrought iron door and opened it, and he followed. They walked up white marble stairs to the second floor, which was actually the fourth floor, first the ground floor, which wasn't called anything, then the "principal," then "primero," then "segundo." The apartment building he lived in was built the same way. Her apartment was different, though, not long and skinny like his, with windows at either end of a long long narrow hall, thirty meters of hall and no outside windows in between, just shutters opening onto interior light shafts, like living in a subway train. Hers was labyrinthine. You could get lost in there.

"Can I get you something to drink?" she asked when they were inside.

"Sure. Do you have any beer?"

"I do. Come on in the kitchen with me."

So he followed her into the kitchen, and she opened two beers and set two glasses out for them, and they sat at the kitchen table and drank beer and talked. Casually. He found out she was Ukrainian and had lived here ten years. She found out that he was Danish and had been here ten weeks. They were both divorced. They were about the same age, she 33, he 36. After they finished their beers she said "come on" and took him by the hand and led him into the bedroom and pulled back the covers and started unbuttoning her blouse. He started unbuttoning his shirt. They got undressed like an old married couple, looking at each other's naked bodies without a great deal of interest. Then they climbed between the covers and put their hands and mouths and genitals in all the private places that adults put them in when they like each other well enough. Afterwards they lay in bed for a long time side by side saying nothing.

Finally she said "Do you smoke?"

And he said "No."

And she said "I don't either."

And he said "Okay."

He visited her at odd intervals. He went over there whenever he felt like it, and if he found her in, she gave him something to drink and they had sex. Then they lay in bed for a long time, not talking much. Sometimes she would ask him about his ex-wife, who was Irish, or he would ask her about her ex-husband, who was Russian. But mostly they just lay there.

You begin therapy the next morning and find that you are so much in love with

your wife and two lovely children a boy and a girl that you must kill them one by one with your own hands and they don't mind they welcome the knife as you press it deep into their heaving chests and the blood spurts out and stains your soft white bathrobe red and their eyes stay fixed on yours with love and gratitude for the kind gentle thing you're doing to them and when they're dead you lay them out side by side on the floor and feel free at last to love them fully and without reserve.

When he got home he peered down the long hallway before entering the apartment. He needed to hide the big stuffed animal he'd bought Juliette before she saw it. Her room was down at the far end of the hall to his right. The kitchen and master bedroom and living room and study were at the other end to the left. The hall was empty, but his wife stuck her head out of the kitchen door.

"Oh, hi, you're home. Have you eaten?"

"Yeah. I grabbed some tapas on the way."

"I wish you'd told me. I'm fixing dinner."

"Maybe I'll have some. Where's Juliette?"

"In her room."

He held up the stuffed animal wordlessly. She nodded and motioned him in. He walked as quickly and as noiselessly as he could into the study at the courtyard end of the apartment, opened the door to the tiny laundry room, dropped the bag with the stuffed animal back behind the washing machine. He came back into the kitchen to find his wife checking a casserole in the oven.

"How was your day?"

"Okay. How was yours?"

"Okay." She looked at him.

He looked back. "What?"

"Is there something you want to tell me?"

"No, why?"

"You're so preoccupied all the time. You never tell me what's going on in your head."

"Nothing very interesting, I can assure you."

"It's interesting to me! I'm your wife!"

"I know."

"So please, don't hold back. Please tell me what's going on."

"I was asked to give a lecture in Tarragona. Bourdieu and French poststructuralism."

"Great! When?"

“In two weeks.”

“That’s wonderful!”

“It’s not that wonderful. One-hour train ride down, one-hour talk, one-hour train ride back. They’ll give me 20,000 pesetas for it, though.”

“That’ll be nice.”

“We don’t need it.”

“No. You’re right. What we need,” the French schoolmarm in her putting an edge in her voice, “is better communication.”

“What, between us?”

“Of course between us.”

“We’re talking, aren’t we?”

“Yes, but Jan, we’re talking about superficial things. We need to talk about the things that really matter!”

“Like what?”

“Like what we’re feeling! How you feel about me, how I feel about you.”

“How do you feel about me?”

“I’m worried.”

“Why?”

“Because you don’t talk to me.”

“I just asked you how you’re feeling, didn’t I?”

“Jan, that’s not enough!”

“Nothing’s ever enough, you know that. We’ve talked about that too.”

“You’ve talked about it.”

“See? And you claim I never tell you anything.”

“You tell me just enough to get me off your back. Sometimes I wonder why you brought us along on this trip.”

“I thought that was obvious.”

“You did?”

“Of course.”

“Then tell me why!”

“So you could visit your family in France more often. So you could spend a year back in southern Europe again, where it’s warm. It must get depressing for you, living in Sweden, with all us dour gloomy Swedes.”

“Sometimes it does, yes. But the dour gloomy Swede I care about most came with me.”

“So what’s your point?”

“My point, Jan, is that it doesn’t do me much good to come to southern Europe if my husband, the most important person in the world to me, isn’t going to

share his life with me.”

“What do you mean, share my life with you. Of course I share my life with you. I live here, don’t I? We’re here together, aren’t we?”

“Physically.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that I’m not getting enough from you, Jan. I need more.”

“You always need more.”

“Because you never give me enough!”

“Because no matter how much I give you, it’s never enough!”

“Oh, shit.”

“Come on, face it. You have a set of expectations in your head, some kind of husband ideal, and I don’t live up to it. The ideal husband talks about x number of feelings for y number of minutes every day at z level of psychological depth. And I fall short. I’m somewhere down around x minus a hundred and y minus five hundred and z minus a million.”

“It’s not like that, Jan, really!”

“How is it, then?”

“People who love each other *talk* to each other! They tell each other things! They want to be inside each other’s skins!”

“In France, maybe. Maybe that’s a southern European thing. Maybe that’s a Catholic thing, all that confessing to the priest. That’s not the way I was brought up.”

“Obviously.”

“Yeah, it’s obvious. And you knew what I was like before we were married, right?”

“Right.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“Listen, Jan, do you want us here?”

“Of course I do.”

“Tell me honestly, Jan: are you seeing somebody else? Do you have a girlfriend here?”

“Of course not. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Because if you are, all you have to do is tell me, and I’ll pack Juliette and myself up and we’ll go to my parents’ in Marseilles.”

“There’s nobody but you, and there’s never been anybody but you, and I don’t want anybody but you.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. Oh, damn ...”

“What?” She got that look of hers again. There he goes.

“It’s nine, that movie I wanted to watch on TV3 started ten minutes ago.”

“Go.”

He stood up heavily from the kitchen stool. Just then Juliette poked her head in.

“Hi pappa. Are you guys fighting? I heard you fighting.”

“No, sweetie. Just talking.”

“Pappa, are you mad at maman?”

“No, honey, I love your maman very much.”

“Okay.”

He kissed her on the head and went into the living room to watch TV.

You love your wife and two lovely children a boy and a girl so deeply and painfully and yes they are back in your next session though perhaps in different bodies you can't quite tell but you feel that same overpowering love for them as you walk in the room and see them sitting there waiting expectantly you love them so deeply that every little noise they make and question they ask irritates you to no end but you hold it in of course because you're a loving husband and father and would never show your irritation to them even in small ways and the kids play loudly screeching and running around and your wife is in one of her moods and keeps needling you about something and you love them so much that you don't let yourself get angry and then there is a large Turkish scimitar in your hands and you are running amok amongst them slashing left and right until they lie dead and bleeding before you and you pant with the exertion but feel free at last to tolerate their noisily overflowing lives forever.

The movie was five or six years old, Willem Dafoe and Gregory Hines as CID investigators in Saigon. He'd seen it before but enjoyed it again. While he sat there watching it, though, something began to spread through him, some kind of longing. He didn't know what it was, and he was watching a movie so he didn't pay much attention to it, and he was not in the habit of self-inspection anyway, but it was there, and by the time the movie ended it was strong enough for him to notice.

He was lonely.

He wished he had someone with him, someone he knew, someone who cared about him, someone he could feel close to.

He almost wished he had a live-in girlfriend, or even — well, no, but almost

— a wife.

A girlfriend, then. Someone to share his days and nights.

Or maybe a dog. A big golden retriever. A big strong but loving dog that would sleep on the bed next to him at night, lie next to him on the floor when he worked on his computer, lie up here on the couch with him when he watched movies, with its head on his leg. He could stroke that soft golden head while he watched. Someone to keep him company.

If you got a girlfriend she started wanting to move in, and if she moved in she started wanting to get married, and if you married her she started wanting babies. That was too much togetherness.

But a *dog*.

But then he thought: what would the dog do in a tiny apartment built like a subway train while I'm at the university all day? It would be a crime to coop a big dog up in an apartment all day. It would shit on the floors and chew up the furniture. He would have to walk it twice a day.

Still, a dog would be better to talk to than a girlfriend or a wife. A dog would listen with those big intelligent loving eyes and not understand a word. Would never talk back. Would never use what you said against you. You could say anything, factual or invented, loving or critical, it wouldn't matter. The dog would just love you.

He would give it some thought. Maybe a dog. Maybe a smaller dog that wouldn't ever have to go out. He could keep it like a cat. Teach it to pee and poop in a litter box. Some kind of toy dog, Maltese or Pekinese or something.

Or maybe nothing. Maybe this feeling would pass. He'd been lonely before. It always went away eventually.

Your love for your family is so all-consuming that you take a mistress and bring her home and make loud passionate love to her in the middle of the living room floor with your wife and two lovely children looking on yes a boy and a girl and perhaps they look a little different from the last session but they are yours you know that right off and they watch your wild thrusting and sucking and whipping without embarrassment so you bring another woman in and fuck her too and then another and soon there is a writhing orgy in the middle of your living room floor which is made of a beautifully varnished hardwood with large woven rugs and it's lovely really but perhaps a bit crowded with all these people in it and your wife and children move back toward the walls but the naked bodies bump up against them and you bring some other children in too and take your children's toys away

from them and give them to the new children and your daughter is eating an ice cream and you take that away from her too and say she mustn't be selfish by eating ice cream in front of our guests who don't have any and give the ice cream to one of the little girls who have come to play and they are playing in amongst the fucking and you seem to have an everlasting Viagra erection because you come and come and come and it never goes down and it is getting red and chafed and sore but you keep putting it into new holes and coming and coming and some of the holes belong to the children and you think they are the new ones but you can't be sure really because they all look like your children now and you think maybe one of the little boys you brought in is fucking your wife and she has her head turned to one side as if a little bored with the whole scene but not unpleasantly not as if she wanted to be somewhere else really this isn't that unpleasant a way to spend an afternoon and the fucking continues for a really long time and even you are getting sick of it and people are falling asleep and you are turning them over and spreading their legs and fucking their sleeping bodies in the vagina and anus over and over and you can't stop really even though it feels like your penis is on fire and you have a splitting headache and your back is killing you and your children are gathered around you as you hump some pile of flesh you can't be sure but you think it might be your grandmother and the children plead with you daddy please stop enough you're tired you need to sleep but you can't stop and your wife has brought you a glass of lemonade and some sandwiches and urges you to take a break and eat something you'll exhaust yourself dear but you go on fucking these bodies and sometimes one wakes up but mostly they just lie there and eventually after many many hours you can feel the darkness creeping up slyly on you and it sneaks up your back and over your shoulders and up your neck into your brain and you fall unconscious and keel over onto the floor and you know in the moment before you lose consciousness that now at last you are free to love your wife faithfully until your dying day.

After the movie he went out. Walked the streets randomly. Finally he stopped into a cerveseria and ordered a beer. The passageway past the bar was crowded. People walked past him constantly and nudged him, almost spilling his beer. After a while he decided to go find a seat. The tables were crowded too but there was a table with only a thirtyish woman sitting at it, fresh and freckly and clean-cut, American probably. He spoke English to her:

“I'm sorry, is this seat taken?”

“No, go right ahead.”

“You’re American?”

“Yes, how could you tell?”

“From your accent.”

“Oh, right, that gives it away every time, doesn’t it? Hi, I’m Debby.”

“I’m Jan.”

“Hi, Jan. Where are you from?”

“Czech Republic.”

“Oh, wow, that sounds cool. So you speak, what, Czech?”

“That’s right.”

“Your English is excellent.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome!”

“So how long have you been in Spain?”

“Just a week. We’re here for two weeks.”

“We?”

“A girlfriend and I. Her name’s Meggy.”

“Where is she tonight?”

“Oh, she’s met some guy.” She sighed a little, obviously trying not to.

“So the two of you planned this trip together?”

“Yeah. We’re best friends. We decided to take two weeks off work and go to Spain. We’re from Minnesota, so the idea of spending some time on the Mediterranean in the middle of winter was pretty attractive to us, let me tell you! But it’s *cold* here!”

“They didn’t tell you that it gets cold in Spain in the winter?”

“No! Did you know?”

“I don’t remember. I’ve lived here so long, it seems like I’ve always known.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“Fifteen years.”

“Is your wife Spanish?”

“What makes you think I’m married?”

“I don’t know, you’re the right age to be married, I suppose. Most men of a certain age are married, I’ve found.”

“I’m divorced.”

“Married *or* divorced!” she cried merrily, correcting her mistake. “So *was* your wife Spanish?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have any kids?”

“Two.”

“Boys? Girls?”

“A boy and a girl.”

“How nice. Do you have pictures of them?”

“Not with me, no.”

“Do they live with their mother?”

“Yes.”

“Here in Barcelona?”

“Down the coast a ways. Pretty close. A half-hour train ride away.”

“So do you see them often?”

“As often as I can.”

“Do you ever think of going back to Czechoslovakia?”

“Czech Republic.”

“Oh, right.”

“I go back every year.”

“I mean, move back. Permanently.”

“Oh. No. Never. Life is good here. There’s lots more money to be made, the climate is nicer, people in shops are friendlier.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a professor.”

“Really! I’ve never met a professor before!”

“Well, now you have.”

“What do you profess?” Her eyes glinted at her little joke: “profess,” for teach.

“Medieval history.”

“Really! That’s interesting! I know almost nothing about the Middle Ages.”

“Most people don’t. Good thing, too, or they wouldn’t pay me to teach them about it.”

“I never thought of it that way!”

He held up his empty glass. “Listen, I’m going for another beer. Can I get you something?”

“Uh, okay. White wine, please!”

He went and got their drinks. Standing at the bar, waiting for the bartender to fill their glasses, he thought: I could probably get this girl into bed tonight. And then he thought: do I want to? The question surprised him. Did he want to get laid? Of course he did!

But did he want to deal with her endless bright questions? Wasn’t she just a bit too *perky* for him? Wasn’t she just a bit too — *American*?

She would want to know all about him. She would want to know his whole

life history. She would tell him hers, and then expect him to tell her his. She would be the daughter of a school teacher or minister or well-to-do farmer. She would work in a bank or a government office or the front office of some manufacturing company. She would never have married, and would have spent a good number of hours every week thinking about her biological clock. Ten years left, tick, tick, tick. Get a man, get a ring, get some sperm.

Could he handle that?

He paid for the drinks and went back to the table.

“So,” he said, sitting down, “what do you do back home?”

“I work in a bank. I’m a teller. Not very glamorous, is it? But it’s an important job. Somebody’s got to do it!”

He sipped his beer, nodded his agreement. Somebody had to do it. Somebody has to do everything. Somebody has to drink. Somebody has to talk. Somebody has to fuck. They’re all important jobs.

He finished his drink, told her it had been nice talking to her, and left the bar.