

Mona Houghton

Sex

I dream about getting into a warm tub of water and drawing a razor blade across my wrists. I dream about the blood flowing and I dream about swimming into oblivion. At the same time I see a man sticking his hand into a little girl's shorts and I know the little girl feels funny about it and I suppose the man does too. It is the little girl's first secret, for she is only two. The man has many.

I went to a psychiatrist once. I could not talk about sex with her. During my sessions I babbled about my mother, my father, the hostile voices; instead I wrote her letters about sex. I didn't tell her the half of it in the letters, but I did write about what bothered me the most. I purposely sought out a woman psychiatrist because I knew if I went to a man I would end up falling in love with him, into some kind of love. I would want to have sex with him. I want to make love with someone who knows everything about me, someone who forgives me. Then, perhaps, I won't feel so lonely, afterwards.

I am not shy in bed.

After making love a blue haze descends over my world.

I hate seeing this in movies; a man tells a woman how much he wants her and she ends up falling in love with him. It insults women and men and love and it is something I have done many times in my own life—think I am in love just because some joker wants to sleep with me. It is simply sex. I have been in situations when I thought some guy was a jerk and then he'd tell me how much he wanted to sleep with me, and suddenly I wouldn't be able to get him out of my mind—I'd want him so bad. It makes me sick to know this about myself, this need to

Bluff City

be wanted. And it will happen again, inevitably.

Patricia is a housewife, a mother of two. Before she had children she worked for a landscape architect as a draftsman. Before she married she had a lot of affairs. Patricia's children are three years old and five years old, a girl and a boy. In a year or two she will go back to work.

Since leaving her job, Patricia has turned to her own backyard, to landscaping it. The environment challenges her, the desert pushing in. Patricia keeps it at bay—rainbirds, sprinklers. She is vigilant. Midnight waterings.

I dream of taping the seams around the windows in the kitchen and breakfast nook, of putting towels down against the cracks under the door to the dining room and to the backyard, of taking off all of my clothes, of unhooking the gas lines to the stove and clothes dryer and leaving the valves open, of lying down on the counter, I dream of sinking. At the same time I see a little girl in a library standing between the stacks holding Dr. Seuss under her arm and I see a man standing in front of her with his pants down holding a swollen, angry penis. The little girl, for the first time, stands outside herself and witnesses an event as it happens. For her it is like reading a book or watching something on television.

My husband, Jack, is not a demanding man.

I could never have an affair, not a real affair, because I hate to lie. Lying scares me, not because I think it is wrong but because I am afraid of getting caught—that horrible empty feeling when someone confronts you with something private, something you never wanted them to know. I would rather suffer physical pain, a needle through my toe. You might think I don't know what I am talking about, that I am just saying this. You are wrong. I am equipped to make the statement.

Physical pain ends and it is hard to remember the sensation in any tactile way. The other kind of pain, that deep shame, I re-experience it over and over and over again. I can't let up on it. I dig up a thirty year old event and suffer it more acutely than I did the first time around.

This doesn't stop me from thinking, though. I can be very detached. I like looking at men in jogging clothes. I like it when I pull up to a red light in my car, glance over, catch some man's eye, and have a sensation sweep through my body. Sometimes it is the most real thing that happens to me in a day.

Last week I bought five hundred feet of one half inch copper pipe. I am going to plumb the backyard. Moving the hose, screw on attachments, plants depend on more regularity than this system offers. I want something permanent out there. The man at the plumbing store—he had on cut-off jogging pants—told me how to sweat the pipe, how to rough the ends up with the wire brush, how to use the propane torch. I am going to make drawings before I begin.

Patricia likes the desert heat, even in the summer time when the mercury slips up on 120.

She moved here right after she finished technical college. She was thirty-two at the time and wanted a job and there was a landscape architect in Palm Springs looking for personnel. At first she couldn't imagine living so far away from the city, from her friends, but it really didn't take long for her to adapt. She found a cheap apartment twenty minutes away from the office in a little town called Desert Hot Springs and she found a bar she liked five minutes away from the apartment. In a matter of months she stopped making the two hour drive to Los Angeles.

Now when Patricia goes to a bar she only drinks ginger ale with a twist of lime. Before Jack she used to

Bluff City

order shots of tequila with beer chasers or Manhattans.

I dream of driving down an empty freeway at night in a bright red sports car. The roof is down and the wind whips through my hair and I am going very fast. The overpasses appear more frequently, beating by. Finally I steer the car into one of the pillars. I dream of shattering, of my body breaking into many pieces. At the same time I see a little girl sitting outside a playground, alone, eating candy and a man who is running down the sidewalk stops in front of the girl and points a gun at her and takes the candy away and kisses her. He sticks his dirty, mean tongue down her throat. It takes days for her to get the taste of him out of her mouth, and for the burn from his beard to leave her cheek.

I was wild in my twenties.

I spent a year on the street in Haight Asbury,. I missed the Summer of Love up there, but it hadn't gotten too ugly by the time I hitched into town in '68. It was uglier, anyway, later on, more needles, more rip-offs. I didn't know it then, but I see it now, what *free love* meant. It meant sex. Sex this way, sex that way. Some people did look for alternatives, for different social structures. But the Haight attracted opportunists, manipulators, that sort of person. They would grow their hair long, tie bandannas around their heads, stop shaving, wear the same clothes for six months, and then find some young woman, some girl who had walked away from suburbia, some twenty year old who knew the kaleidoscope dream she found behind the little purple dot did exist. She just needed a guru to take her there. And so I ended up living in a VW van with my *sisters* and my *brothers* and it was beautiful for a while. You remember, either you were there or you saw us on the TV news. We gave flowers away, made leather belts and macrame plant hangers, wore love beads, and above all we smoked pot,

Issue 6

dropped acid, for we were going to change the world. We were going to make love, not war. There would be a new order.

After Woodstock I left the VW van and hitchhiked to Vermont. I had heard about a commune there—all women, no men. I needed a place, then, without the opposite sex.

It was peaceful up on that farm.

For a while I thought the United States should be cut in half, men on one side of the line, women on the other.

In my experience women are soft together. It sounds like a cliché, to you, I am sure. We have all seen the strap on toys. But with us up there on our one hundred rolling acres, we were gentle and kind with one another. Power was not an issue.

Patricia's garden—everyone in the neighborhood talks about it. Drawing the boss' ideas for those three years put some notions into her head, how plants go together, where paving stones belong, the shapes of certain trees. It is here Patricia lets some of her extravagance show; lemon and fiery Bottlebrush, Fan Palms from Mexico, Ribbon Bush, Foxglove in purple and yellow and white, great clumps of Chinese Ground Orchids, rose Speedwells, matilija poppies, Narcissus, and in the middle, her prize, the Golden Trumpet tree. And desert plants, cacti, Mexican Fencepost, Spanish Bayonet.,

In the winter Patricia puts in a lawn, blue grass.

I dream of being on a television talk show, one that airs in the afternoon, one with a live audience. I dream of responding logically to the host's questions: "What was it like to be set on fire by your father?" or "If you could change any one event in your life, which would it be?" or "Each time you look I the mirror, do you relive it?" I

Bluff City

dream of getting up, after the host has turned to the next guest, and walking to mid-stage, of pulling out a short, sharp dagger and committing hara-kiri. I dream of screaming as my insides fall to the floor. At the same time I see a little girl sleeping in her bed and I see a man, an uncle, come in and pull a chair up and sit down, and start to tell the girl he knows all about it, about her secrets, and that she doesn't need to be ashamed with him because he understands. As the uncle talks his hands creep under the sheets. And yes, by the end, he convinces her, he does understand.

I love plumbing, the logic in it, the way the pieces fit together. It satisfies me. Yesterday, with a hack saw, I cut my new pipe to the length I need for my garden and laid them along their intended paths. When I walked out there this morning the copper color glowed in the early, slanty light. Today I will dig the trenches.

I think tattoos are about sex. I know they are about the dark side of human nature. I got mine when I lived with the wickedest man I ever ran across. We drank a lot and always tried to shock each other. I never won. If I had stayed with him I would have pictures all over my body by now. As it is I have three, one on my ankle—a red star, one on my inner thigh—a little tiger, and one on my arm, on the soft side near my wrist.

Late at night I watch my husband. He relaxes in his sleep and looks like I imagine he did as a teenager. His features are strong, a big nose, deep set eyes, broad cheeks. He always takes a shower before bed and I like the way that sweet, soap smell comes up off him. Sometimes I'll kiss him awake and we'll make slow, sleepy love, so gentle there are mornings when he thinks it was a dream. I let him wonder.

My husband grew up out here in the desert and never did spend much time away from home. My past

intrigues him. Most men are possessive and jealous even about parts of your life they had nothing to do with. Not Jack. At least he doesn't let it show. I told him right off I wouldn't lie, so if he asks a question I answer it. He is careful.

Patricia's children scare her because she imagines their pain and it frightens her. She accepts she cannot protect them yet she wishes someone had protected her, anyone. When her children were little, when she could hold them all the time and put them somewhere and know they would not move, Patricia enjoyed being a mother, nurturing these babies. Now that they are mobile, panic dominates. Joey will run off in the grocery store to look for toys. If he's gone for more than a couple of minutes a sense of dread shivers itself through Patricia's body. She finds herself rushing down the aisles. Any adult is suspect.

She assumes her children have suffered some horrible humiliation already, have some lost secrets hidden away inside themselves. Her impotence, her inability to protect them, horrifies her.

I dream. I dream of diving off buildings, of aiming toy guns at policemen, of nooses, of poisons. At the same time I see a confused little girl walking down a street toward a church. She pauses in front of the building, wondering if she can walk in without being struck down. She takes a deep breath as she climbs the stairs. Inside, she isn't afraid; instead the muffled light and dusty smells comfort her. She goes down to the first pew, kneels and starts talking to God. She asks him why things he calls sins keep happening to her. She asks him to stop it, to make everyone go away.

God does not work any magic.

I thought when I married I would stop feeling like sex controlled my life.

Bluff City

My children play out on the sidewalk in front of the house and I stand behind the window in the front room and peer around the curtains, watching them. I am anxious all the time.

I have buried the pipes out in the garden. Now, every plant gets exactly the water it needs. That system—it is there, permanent, unbreakable, and it relieves me, knowing those copper tubes are beneath the surface, their joints soldered, their ninety degree angles true.