

CAVEAT

George Osol



Here is your cross, your nails and your hill;

Here is your love that lists when it will.”

Leonard Cohen

1. AN INTIMATE VIOLATION

“Everything okay boss?” asked the bartender. He was a skinny, overgrown kid with a tangle of red hair perched on a bony, freckled face.

“All good,” said Michael Boylen, although the tension in his voice suggested otherwise. “A pint of Guinness and a shot of Powers. Thanks.”

The kid nodded at the big green Rolling Rock clock on the wall. “If you're hungry, we serve till nine. ‘Bout another hour or so, boss.”

“I’m not your boss,” growled Boylen, “and I’m not hungry. Just bring me the drink.”

The bartender backed away. As he was pulling the pint, he noticed the man’s bloodied knuckles. It crossed his mind that he could have a problem on his hands, but the guy was sitting quietly now, staring at the TV screen above the bar.

He set up the drinks and watched as Michael downed the whiskey and chased it with the entire pint.

“Again.”

The bartender’s eyes widened, but he picked up both glasses without a word and set to work.

As the alcohol began to uncoil his nerves, Michael continued to sit motionless, chin propped in the palm of his left hand and eyes on the TV. The only sign of tension

was the steady drumbeat of his fingers on the polished wooden surface of the bar. He appeared to be watching the Nets game, but if you had asked him what the score was, he wouldn't have had a clue.

He ordered a third round as his mind mulled over the situation with Katherine. *How could she?* thought Michael for the umpteenth time. *How could she?* The mantra kept pinging his mind as his thoughts circled their troubled orbit. Earlier tonight, his wife of eighteen years had decided to push him away, seemingly without reason. Yet, he thought, of course there is a reason. There has to be.

From his experience with friends and coworkers, the process of marital disengagement most often began with one person's discontent, which would fester but lie dormant until an opportunity came along that created an out. Unhappiness opened the door to infidelity and, if the affair had legs, it would catalyze the separation and divorce.

So what was it with Katherine? Was she lying? Was there someone else after all? And why had she chosen to hit him with this tonight, the night before he was leaving home for a month or more?

And then there was the pregnancy piece. Michael's expression morphed into bitterness.

We've been trying to get pregnant for three years at least, he thought, maybe more? It seemed like forever. The ovulation detection kits, the doctor's visits, the fertility counseling, the adoption brochures. God knows they'd been through it all, and Katherine would be turning forty this summer. What kind of woman would give up her own child at that age, and do it without telling her husband?

Michael's head pulsed with the contradictions and inconsistencies. What didn't he get?

He sat for some time thinking, drinking, trying to fit the jumbled pieces together. At least the initial fury was subsiding. If not his mind, then at least his heart had quieted, and the vise that had gripped his chest earlier, when he'd stormed out of the house, had eased.

Something between them had indeed changed over the past year, he decided, and for whatever reason, he'd chosen to ignore it. Katherine had become increasingly distant, more reluctant to have sex. The excuses—"I'm too tired," "I don't feel well," even the classic "I have a headache"—were more frequent.

He'd attributed it to time, or to their failure to conceive and all that came with the effort—the lack of spontaneity, the recurrent sense of mutual failure manifest most pointedly in the 'I started my period' phone call. Admittedly, their sex hadn't been as exciting as exciting as it once was, but that was a fact of time, of life. There were other rewards to marriage - comfort, trust, stability.

Or so he'd thought.

He signaled for a final round, then changed his mind and asked for the check instead. It was after eleven and he was wiped. He didn't need a DUI on top of everything else.

Michael drained the last of the stout, paid the bill, and pulled on his jacket. Walking across the parking lot in the cold November air, he remembered a quote from some English class way back when: *in every relationship there is one who loves, and one who allows themselves to be loved.* Maugham?

In a very simple way, it captured the essence of balance or, more accurately, imbalance in a relationship between two people. It really never is equal, is it?

When it came to him and Katherine, it was probably he who had loved and she who had allowed herself to be loved. During their worst fights it was her, not him, that would threaten to leave. For Michael, that type of threat belied the “for better, for worse” nature of the wedding vow, the mutual commitment. Even though it could cross his mind, it would remain unsaid as a matter of principle, of respect. With her more volatile temperament, Katherine didn’t abide by the same restraint. He might crouch; he might growl; but it was she who would pounce.

He fired up the car and let the engine idle for a few minutes while the defroster took effect. The windshield was speckled with frost and, even in the ever-present light of New Jersey suburbia, the stars twinkled overhead, each pinpoint magnified by the etchings on the glass.

Despite the alcohol, Michael’s mind was lucid, and a strange sense of calm settled onto him. Tonight was a total mess, he thought—an emotional sucker punch—but at least he hadn’t done anything regrettable other than bloodying his hand on the sheetrock of the garage. He would go home and sleep in his own bed. He would sleep with his wife—she was still his wife—and talk things out in the morning. One didn’t throw away eighteen years of marriage without giving it an honest go. Hopefully, the morning would bring its own clarity and equipoise.

One thing was clear, though: their relationship was likely forever altered. The irrevocable power of words, thought Michael. *How could she?*

Upstairs, Katherine was lying on her side in the familiar posture of sleep. Michael climbed under the sheets but didn't touch or wake her. Instead, he lay on his back for some time thinking about her, about them, and about the fact that, by this time tomorrow, he would be six miles high and a thousand miles away.

2. LANGOUSTE

They stepped onto the patio, snorkels and fins in hand. The flat stones underfoot were streaked with dew, and the trail of footprints in their wake was unmistakably that of a woman and a man.

The gravel path beyond the patio led to a staircase, and Michael paused while Katherine began her descent, excited at the prospect of a pre-breakfast swim. It would energize them, and the first cup of coffee would taste all the better afterward.

The crescent bay below was a mottle of blue and green, with a break in the coral halfway through the white arc of reef. It was the one place they could swim through to the open sea without worry.

Birdsongs, and the chirr of insects in the tropical underbrush contrasted with the muted rumble of waves breaking beyond the reef. Katherine and Michael made their way down the stone staircase to the water's edge and sat down on the packed sand that was still cool from the night before.

After donning their gear, they walked backwards into the water holding hands, fins slapping at the water, until Katherine broke free and dove in. Michael followed. Enjoying the coolness of the sea, tasting its saltiness around the mouthpiece of the snorkel, he kept his eyes on

Katherine's pale form ahead. She was treadmilling, propelled easily by the lime green fins, and he followed in her wake.

As they swam further out, the sun's rays cleared the hilltops and the water lightened. The ribbons of sand below alternated with clumps of dark sea grass undulating in some unseen current. Michael glanced up to get a bearing and saw that Katherine was just entering the deeper blue of the cut.

He rolled over and glanced landward.

Except for the occasional east-facing slope, the foothills were still in shadow. Their hotel—tan, with a rippled red roof of Spanish tile—squatted atop the nearest hill, and the stone steps they had walked down formed a gentle curve against the hillside. He rolled back onto his belly and flattened himself, kicking more forcefully to pass cleanly through the break in the reef.

As he entered the cut, he felt a new energy in the water. The swell lifted him up and down, and the surf on the outer edge of reef had become louder. Then he was through, and the wall of coral dropped away sharply to the sandy bottom some fifteen or twenty feet below.

The waves were trying to push him back into the reef, but Michael resisted, knowing that its white and smooth appearance was deceiving, and would cut mercilessly. Even a few drops of blood in the water were a beacon for the unwanted. Hadn't he read somewhere that sharks could sense a drop of blood from half a mile away? Bobbing in the swell beyond the reef, he flipped up his mask and looked around for Katherine.

Although there might be some large fish about this early in the day, Michael wasn't worried. He'd spoken with

the manager the night before, who'd told him to stay away from the nest of hammerheads a quarter of a mile to the south but that, otherwise, there was nothing of concern.

Katherine burst through the water to his left and waved at him furiously. "Michael! Michael! Down here! Hurry!"

Michael slipped the mask back onto his face and swam toward her. He was a good swimmer—less graceful than Katherine, but comfortable in the water and fit from his daily workouts. He drew a deep breath through the snorkel and dove down, not sure what to expect.

At first, it was only greenish water, slightly murky from the sand kicked up by the surf, but then he saw the lobster trap made of wood and chicken wire. The buoy must have broken off, for he would have noticed one on the surface; yes—there was the rope with its tattered end lying on the sandy bottom.

Two *langoustes* were crowded into one corner of the trap. At the opposite end was a small octopus. Its tentacles held a third *langouste* whose dark, mottled claws were arched backwards, snapping wildly, while its thin black antennae waved aimlessly in the water.

The octopus slid two of its tentacles up the lobster's arms, spreading the claws out of the way, while another tentacle wrapped around the base of the whipping tail, immobilizing it. The tentacles were dark and iridescent, and he glimpsed the parallel rows of suction cups on their undersides.

Slowly, unhurriedly, the octopus turned the *langouste* so it faced him and slid the helpless creature into its mouth. With one crunch of its powerful jaws, the lobster was beheaded. Michael saw the green cloud of roe and

innards spilling out of the body, but he was now out of breath. He swam up and burst through the gleaming surface of the sea, and looked around for Katherine. She was nowhere to be seen.

Captivated by the savagery, he took a few deep breaths and dove down again. The octopus had already bitten off the *langouste's* tail, and now it gutted the dismembered body in one swift motion of its beak-like jaws before releasing the two halves of the shell. Inside the trap, the remains of what seconds before had been a living creature floated away, the dark green carapace tumbling slowly through the water.

Michael noticed several other similarly disposed pieces of lobster shell bobbing against the wire and wood ceiling of the trap. The octopus was having a feast! How convenient to have an errant lobster trap to pirate. Curious by nature, the *langoustes* would wander inside without bait only to be trapped by the clever man-made geometry of wire. Captive prey for the little octopus that could squeeze through and have its fill, only to return again tomorrow.

Out of breath again, Michael shot up to the surface and pulled his mask up on his forehead. Treading water, he turned in a circle, searching for Katherine. The sea heaved around him, its azure surface sparkling in the morning sun.

Where was she?

He looked toward the reef, thinking she might have started to head back in, but the cut was empty. The wind was picking up, and the outer edge of the reef was churning with sea foam. Getting back into the safety of the bay might be tricky.

Treading water, Michael turned two full circles before he spotted her, some forty or fifty feet away, floating face

down in the water. She wasn't moving, and her snorkel stuck forward at an odd angle, almost parallel to the surface.

"Katherine!" yelled Michael, unsure of what was wrong. She didn't respond and he began to swim toward her. But now the current was sucking him back into the reef and, despite his best efforts, he was barely gaining. Another glance only worried him more, for he realized she was being pulled out to sea by some unseen current.

Michael yelled, "Katherine!" He yelled again, louder this time, as he slapped the surface, trying to get her attention.

Suddenly, Katherine's body turned and her head rose out of the water. She pulled off her mask and snorkel, and flung them away in a careless motion. What in hell? She looked distant, a touch grotesque even, with strings of fair hair hanging over her face, eyes smeared with black mascara. She gave him an odd, hollow look—half smile, half grimace—before rolling and diving down into the sea. For a moment, her bright green flippers poised above the water like a fish tail, then disappeared.

Had she gone mad? Surprised and fearing the worst, Michael continued trying to swim in her direction. On the edge of panic, he kicked frantically but his legs were hardly moving and the water felt as thick as honey as he churned full force to no avail. Glancing back in desperation to see what was wrong, he felt the fear rise in his throat as he saw a dark brown tentacle the width of a man's forearm coil itself around his ankle. Slowly, patiently, it crept up his leg even as it began to pull him down toward the hulking shape below.

3. MORNING AFTER

Michael awoke and lay on his back for a few minutes, disoriented by the nightmare. His sense of relief evaporated as he realized where he was and remembered last night, which now seemed as unreal as the dream.

Katherine was already up.

Logy with the accidie of a hangover, Michael swung his feet to the floor and sat on the bed for a few minutes, getting his bearings. His right hand ached when he tried to make a fist, and his whole body felt stiff from last night's alcohol. His mouth felt like it was stuffed with wet cardboard, and the morning light was much too bright.

She was at the kitchen table reading the paper.

"Morning," said Katherine without looking up.

"Hey," said Michael, but didn't kiss her as he normally would have. He stood for a minute looking at her, unsure, before pouring a cup of coffee and sitting down across from her.

They sat quietly for a few minutes. Outside, a neighbor's dog began to bark.

"Are you ok?" said Katherine finally.

Michael nodded.

"Where'd you go?"

"Town," he said. "Gleason's."

“That’s what I guessed.”

She gave him a wistful look. “I’m sorry Michael. I should have been more gracious last night, but it’s been building up inside me for so long. I had to do it. I had to put it on the table. Can you understand that?”

On the table, he thought. There’s a lawyer for you.

“I just don’t get what’s going on,” he said, voice gravelly with hangover. “Life isn’t perfect, but I thought we were basically doing okay.”

“That’s the problem, Michael,” said Katherine. Her voice turned brusque. “We’re *not* doing ok. At least I’m not.”

“I get that,” said Michael. “What I don’t understand is why you feel the way you do. Could something else be going on?”

Katherine squinted up at him. “Like what?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Something...” he searched for the right word. “...organic? Have you thought about having a work-up, getting checked out?”

She took a sip of coffee and looked away before answering.

“I did, as...” Katherine hesitated. “...as part of the procedure. I told the doctor that I feel tired all the time, down. Kind of numb. They took blood tests and such.”

“I see,” said Michael, though he hardly did.

He looked across the kitchen table at his wife. Eyes downcast and shoulders slumped, Katherine looked frail and dejected. He put his hand on hers and gave it a squeeze. She didn’t pull away, but didn’t respond either.

Katherine sighed. “I wish you weren’t leaving tonight,” she said, “and that this didn’t happen when it

did. I should have brought it up weeks ago. And," she added, "I didn't mean it to be so harsh."

"I thought the same thing at first," he said. "I mean about leaving. But maybe it's not a bad thing in a way. A little distance might help us - help you - get some perspective on all this."

"Always the optimist," said Katherine.

Michael smiled. "I try to be."

He made some eggs while Katherine put on another pot of coffee.

Over breakfast, Katherine mentioned looking into therapy, which offered some hope. At least she was willing to try. All in all, decided Michael, this morning was very different from last night. Less confrontational, more mutual, less angry.

Later, as he started packing, he realized that there were two things his mind kept returning to over and over.

The first was that business about her still loving him, but not being 'in love' anymore. She'd said it last night and, as trite as it was, he realized that what hurt was the intimation of finality. Could one fall back in love after falling out? It didn't seem likely.

The second was her choosing to have an abortion without involving him. He was all for choice, for a woman's rights, but this was his child too, after all, wasn't it? By all but the most compassionate measure, it was a deal breaker, but he *was* compassionate—he prided himself on that—and he wasn't ready to break the deal. At least not yet.

Michael glanced at his watch. Almost noon already. This was one of those days when time was flying by all too quickly. He had arranged to meet Chris for lunch and

considered cancelling—it would be easier, and he could use the extra time—but decided against it. The easy wasn't always the right. It would have to be quick, but it might help to see his best friend, and to get out of the house for an hour or two.

He could certainly use the distraction, and they didn't have to leave for the airport until five.