

Flowers in the Trash Can

It was a beautiful sunny afternoon, the air held the promise of a wonderful fall. Half the trees lining the city park were turning red, orange and yellow, the other half still held their green. My morning couldn't have gone better; it was my thirtieth birthday, three of my colleagues surprised me with an offer to take me out for lunch and my supervisor told me to take the rest of the day off.

I decided to take a walk after I left the restaurant, rather than head back to our empty apartment. That's why I found myself walking through the park and why I was at the corner of Main and Pine when it caught my eye. Sitting inside a trash can on the edge of the park was a bouquet of flowers. Not just a simple arrangement; an almost gaudy display of red roses, yellow irises, purple larkspur and four flowers I couldn't identify, all sitting in the trash.

I walked across the street; there was a nice café with outdoor seating and open tables that fronted the park. I sat at the table nearest the street, ordered a Campari Negroni and watched as people walked by the trash can. A few people did a double-take as they passed the bouquet, some even stopped and walked back to have a closer look. Nobody disturbed the flowers, although one lady took a photo with her cell phone.

I slowly sipped my cocktail; watching as a man in a business suit stopped, shook his head, then moved on. He was a young man, perhaps my age, a little on the chubby side, maybe five-nine. My mind began to wander; I took out my notebook.

John Farnsworth couldn't help but be amazed at the streak of luck he'd been on lately. Five years out of graduate school, five years of busting his butt at the bank, and today he was called into the President's office and told the Board elected him his VP title. He almost started to laugh, thinking it was some kind of prank, but of course Mr. Jackson never joked about these things, it was real. A vice president, three months before his twenty-ninth birthday; it had to be a record. (In fact it was according to his administrative assistant Ms. Barnes, who has been with the bank since its inception in 1989.)

John walked out of Mr. Jackson's office and made a decision - this would be the day. He'd been dating Michelle for six months now, they've been sleeping together and exclusive for five of those months and exchanged "I love you" shortly before the first time they had sex. John sometimes found it hard to believe that a woman as beautiful, smart and charming as Michelle was his girlfriend. Plus, she had such a wonderful influence on John. She never complained about the extra time John put in at the office, was always ready to go do something at a moment's notice, and she encouraged him to be his best.

Her encouragement got him back in the gym. In the past six months John lost twenty pounds and was looking the best since his wrestling days in high school. He planned to lose another ten pounds before having to buy a few new suits; his current wardrobe gave John the appearance of being chubby.

John called Michelle's office and asked if she was free for lunch. "I have some great news and I need to ask you a question."

"Aren't you going to give me a hint?"

"No, just meet me at Sullivan's at the Park."

Michelle sounded intrigued. "Oh, a mystery. I love it."

"And I love you, babe. See you at noon."

At eleven-thirty John walked out of his office. Ms. Barnes couldn't help but smile as John walked past her desk whistling a tune. It was one of his mother's favorite Beatles' tunes sung by Paul, 'Michelle'. John made a quick stop at the flower shop in the downstairs lobby.

"I want a bouquet, something special for a most special lady."

With the bouquet in hand, John floated down the street, still whistling the tune and letting his imagination run wild. What would the next year bring? The next decade? The next fifty years? John's parents recently celebrated their thirty-fifth anniversary and were still madly in love. John could easily see himself with Michelle in thirty-five years, sharing life, love, children.

There she was. Michelle was already seated at a table outside. As John approached the restaurant, Michelle waved. When she saw the huge bouquet of flowers, her smile brightened. John was the nicest, most generous man or boy Michelle ever dated, he always did both the little and big things to make her feel loved.

John reached the table, bending down to give her a kiss; Michelle reached for the bouquet. "For me?"

John pulled it back. "Not yet." And sat down in the chair across from her. "In a little bit. First, I want to introduce you to the newest vice president at First Bank."

Michelle caught on immediately. "Oh John, that's fantastic." She squeezed his hand. "I'm so happy for you – congratulations!"

"Getting the Sullivan account put me over the top. Mr. Jackson said the Board wanted to let me know how much I'm appreciated."

Michelle smiled again.

John squeezed Michelle's left hand. "So that's my big news I promised. Now I have a question."

The waiter chose this exact moment to show up at their table and ask John if he could bring him a drink; Michelle was already sipping a glass of white wine.

"Yes, please bring us a bottle of champagne. We're celebrating today."

"My boyfriend received great news today." Michelle told the waiter before he turned away.

"We're not only celebrating my promotion." John picked the flowers off the table and handed them to Michelle. "We can pick out a ring together later; let this bouquet represent that token. Michelle, will you marry me?"

The seconds dragged out into an incredibly uncomfortable vacuum of silence as John waited for Michelle's response and Michelle stared at John, wondering what words would cause the least damage. Finally, not knowing how to put it any better, she simply told him the truth.

"John, I don't love you like that."

That's all it took; in less than a minute, John's world turned upside-down, from the highest heights to the deepest depths. Maybe he heard her wrong.

"But, you've told me you love me. We've been sleeping together for the past four months. You tell me how happy I make you. What am I missing here?"

"All those things are true, John. But I'll never love you enough to be your wife. I'd always feel like I settled and didn't wait long enough for the right man. We'd be miserable and eventually divorce, I guarantee it."

As soon as the word 'settled' left her lips, Michelle knew it was the wrong choice. Michelle's words reached John's ears and found their way to his brain; but he couldn't understand them. "Settled, miserable, divorce, never love you enough." Just last night, as they made love, this woman was covering his face and mouth in kisses until they both orgasmed.

See, that was another thing, another reason John knew they were meant to be together – the sex was just so damn good!

The waiter brought out the champagne and was about to open it.

"Wait!"

John got up from the table. "We changed our minds." John pulled all the cash out of his wallet, eighty-two dollars, handing the bills to the waiter. "This is to cover her drink and your tip. I'm assuming the champagne can go back since it wasn't opened. Sorry."

The waiter accepted the cash and nodded. "Thank you." Not knowing what else to say; something obviously went very wrong.

John picked up the flowers, turning to walk away. The waiter wasn't the only one who didn't know what to say. John wondered - is a simple 'goodbye' appropriate? He couldn't call her a bitch – she never promised him anything – he merely assumed she loved him as much as he loved her.

John was already out of the fenced dining area when Michelle shouted after him. "Can't I keep the flowers?"

"No." He walked across the street and stuffed the bouquet in the trash can; right on top of all the other garbage people left there - the fast-food bags, the soda cans, even a damaged umbrella someone threw out after this morning's rain shower.

Michelle called John the next day. She tried to do her best to make up to him. Couldn't they continue to be friends with benefits? Would he meet her for dinner one night soon? John's reply to each request was the same. "I can't see that happening; nothing will change – I'll always want more from our relationship than what you want. Better to end it now; before you eventually dump me for a guy you do want to marry." They did meet a few times after that afternoon, but only for the purpose of exchanging items left in each other's apartments. The city is big enough that they could live their separate lives and never see each other again.

John was sitting in a tavern one afternoon when the husband of one of Michelle's girlfriends walked in. John always liked the guy and offered to buy him a beer. The two got to talking and eventually John had to ask.

"I guess I was always afraid to ask her. Maybe you know. What did Michelle mean when she told me she would be 'settling' if she accepted my proposal?"

"Michelle is a victim of her pre-conceived notions of Prince Charming. John, you're like me – neither of us is tall, dark and handsome, we're solid 'sevens' on the one-to-ten scale. I'm fortunate, my wife loves me for what I am. Find yourself a woman who looks past all that bullshit and loves you for the same reasons. There are plenty of women like my Jennifer."

John shook his head. "I lost almost twenty pounds while I dated Michelle, but I'll never be more than five-nine."

"If it's any consolation; Michelle told Jenn a few times how much she misses you. Told Jenn all about your great qualities, she just couldn't get past the image of the ideal mate she has in her head. Her loss."

Five years later, John saw Michelle at an outdoor concert. John's wife stood next to him while they waited for his wife's bag to pass through the security screener; she noticed John's eyes staring at a brunette.

"Someone you know?" she asked.

His wife's voice seemed to shake him. "Remember I told you about once proposing and getting turned down?"

"Yes, I remember. Why – is that her?"

"Yeah."

"Pretty woman. Do you want to go say hello?"

"No, I'd feel like I was just rubbing it in."

"Rubbing what in?"

John grabbed his wife's hand. "Me here with you. The fact she said 'no' and I obviously traded up when I met and married you."

Now, most wives would hear a line like that and call 'bullshit'; but John's wife knew John well enough to know he was being perfectly honest; he actually thought he married the most beautiful woman in the world. She gave John a hug, thinking how happy he'll be when she gives him the news later tonight at the hotel. John is going to be a daddy!

My waiter came out to see if I'd like another drink, waking me from my daydream. The sun was still warm, my glass was empty and I still didn't have anywhere to be just yet. "Why not?"

I looked back across the street, in time to spot a very attractive lady as she did what so many others preceding her did – looking at the bouquet and pausing before moving on.

Alexis Walker, nee North. spent the last hour debating whether to start smoking again or not. She only quit because Matt insisted he wouldn't marry her until she gave up 'that filthy habit'. So, to please Matt, she went cold turkey with the help of a nicotine patch. Too bad Matt couldn't give up his bad habits.

Matt was a flirt. It didn't seem like such a bad habit when they were dating during college. Every one of their friends seemed to be alive and fun-loving, the flirting was just part of it. It never went any farther than dancing and an occasional kiss or grab-ass. Alexis gave as good as she got. But like so many things, the transition from college life to married/adult life brought changes. Few of their male friends were willing to let their wives get groped. The women started to get defensive when some young thing put a lip-lock on a husband.

Who hadn't changed? Matt.

Alexis and Matt married the second year after graduation. They were one of the few couples whose relationship survived past college. The trouble was – the relationship and marriage were soon to join the others in the past tense. Alexis sat in the café fighting the urge for that cigarette, it would taste so good with this cup of coffee. What's more harmful, a big pastry or a cigarette?

The attorney she retained this morning would have the papers ready to serve Matt in two days. Alexis sat on the café patio, drinking decaf, wondering if she could bum a smoke from the guy at the next table, and watching the trees across the street shake the water from this morning's rain off their leaves.

Alexis could have lived with the flirting, but not the cheating. Two years into their marriage, Alexis caught Matt the first time. He was screwing that little slut from across the courtyard. The little bitch would prance around her apartment with those sheer curtains as the only window coverings; the lights on in the room and her silhouette playing on the curtains. Sometimes in daylight she didn't even bother to close the curtains as she casually walked naked through her apartment.

She wore the skimpiest bikinis down at the pool. Once, at an apartment patio party, she had a pair of daisy dukes and a white wife beater tee-shirt. No underwear, a hound like her husband couldn't resist. Three months after the bitch moved into the complex, she made certain Alexis knew. Matt was too stupid to know he'd been set up.

When Alexis confronted Matt, he apologized all to hell. Made every promise known to man that it would never happen again and pleaded for Alexis to forgive him. A bouquet of flowers arrived every week at both the apartment and her office until Alexis finally gave in.

"But first, get tested for STDs; no telling where that skank has been or who's she's been with!"

Matt got tested, came back clean, Alexis let Matt back in their bed.

Alexis knew the bitch's game. Matt wasn't any outstanding stud in the bedroom; he couldn't have been anything other than average size and his talents didn't exceed his size. No, the bitch just needed to prove her superiority by bedding any husband she could and then rub the wife's face in the infidelity.

Against her better judgment she forgave him. She loved the bastard but made it plain as day that any further transgressions were unforgivable. Even made him sign a post-nuptial.

Matt knew he dodged a bullet; it all started when the blonde moved in across the courtyard and began her exhibitions, driving him mad. Here again, Matt was being dishonest with himself - maybe he couldn't help it, he was dishonest with everyone – his fall from grace didn't start with this blonde, almost every female crossing his path gave Matt some reason to lust after; it's just that the blonde was more available than the others. The shadows on the sheer curtains first caught his attention a week after she moved in. Matt almost said something to Alexis as he sat on their back deck.

But he kept his mouth shut and the next day was at REI buying the best pair of binoculars in the store. He began to spend more time on the deck, watching and waiting. The light in the blonde's window would light up, and if he could get away with it, if Alexa was busy in the den for instance, he'd run inside and watch from one of the darkened rooms.

Like a trout caught on a barbed hook, Matt was dead meat.

Despite the blonde's best efforts, it took three attempts with Alexis' husband to get caught by Alexis. The blonde almost gave up after the second session in her bedroom. Damn, how the hell did that woman put up with this loser? The third attempt she made certain they did it in his own bed, that's how they got caught – what a stupid dolt!

Why did she hate Alexis? From the first time she saw her, she hated her; her jealousy white hot. Alexis was blessed with that slim body and long, toned legs. Alexis had friends. And most of all, as she flirted with Matt at the pool patio party, Matt just went on and on about how lucky he was to have married Alexis.

Worse of all, when Alexis discovered Matt cheating on her, she ends up forgiving the mope and taking him back!

Which is what Alexis did. Not that it was easy; it took Matt two weeks to get back into the apartment and over a month before sharing her bed again. For the entire next year, Matt did his best to assure Alexis that his cheating days were over. Alexis cautiously re-opened her heart to Matt, forgiving him and doing her best to forget his infidelity.

Alexis shouldn't have been surprised a little over a year later when she found out he was cheating again; the surprise was more the way she found out. Matt was playing golf when the doorbell rang.

Opening the door, she looked at the young girl standing before her, asking, "Are you Alexis?"

"Yes." Alexis was waiting for the girl to ask if she wanted to buy Girl Scout cookies or something; but why would this young girl know her name?

"Can I talk to you, please?"

Curious, Alexis nodded. "Go ahead."

"It's kind of private. Can I come in?"

Alexis looked behind the girl. She heard of scams where the girl gets in followed by some brute. She didn't see anyone and unlocked the screen. She locked the screen as soon as the girl crossed the threshold. "How can I help you?"

The girl took a deep breath. "You can let Matthew go; give him a divorce."

Alexis nearly went into shock and barely got two words out. "Excuse me?"

"Why don't you let Matthew go? If you loved him as much as you should, you'd want him to be happy and let him go. I'll make him happy."

If Alexis was watching this scene in some cheesy rom-com, it might have seemed crazy and amusing; but this was her life, dammit, not some TV show. Inside Alexis was a bubbling cauldron of hot lava, but she needed answers and kept her cool. Even so, Alexis couldn't help herself and had to ask, "How old are you?"

The girl appeared hurt by the question; but answered. "I'll be nineteen next month."

Alexis didn't say it out loud, but was thinking, "Eighteen, too bad, a year younger and I could get his ass thrown in jail."

In order to keep the conversation flowing, she had turned her phone recorder on, Alexis almost asked if she could get the girl a glass of wine, then remembered she was too young to drink. "Can I get you a Coke?"

Lacy, that was her name, thought this was going pretty well. She was expecting a hysterical shrew from how Matthew described her; instead, she's offering a Coke.

Alexis came back into the room with a Coke for Lacy and a glass of wine for herself. Twenty minutes later, the extent of Alexis' patience, Lacy was gone and Alexis' phone had the 'who' (Lacy Brown), 'where they met' (Lacy works at Tremors, the local Hooters knockoff), 'how long has this been going on' (two months), and the 'what' (Alexis could have done without hearing how wonderful it was when Lacy and Matt 'made love', but now has it all on recorder). By the time she left, Lacy had Alexis' promise that Matt would soon be free.

Alexis held it together as she packed a bag and drove to her sister Haley's house. As soon as she walked in the door, Alexis collapsed and sobbed for the next hour as her sister hugged her. Haley's heart ached as Alexis told her about Matt's transgressions, Alexis' shoulders shaking uncontrollably. Haley never knew about the first woman and wished Matthew would walk in the door, she'd like nothing more than to tear him a new asshole for what he'd done to her little sister.

That was Sunday, sis called a friend who had recently gotten a divorce. By Monday morning, Alexis had an appointment to meet with an attorney on Wednesday.

At the meeting Wednesday morning, the attorney was optimistic about how it would all play out, given the post-nuptial. Matt would be served Friday. Alexis finished her cup of coffee and was ready to head home; time to pack a few more things out of the condo, when she looked up to see Matt standing there with a big bouquet of flowers.

"Come home, Alex. I'm sorry, so sorry."

Alexis kept walking, crossed the street while Matt followed.

“What can I do to make it up to you?”

Alexis stopped and reached out for the bouquet. Matt was stunned, thinking to himself, “Could it really be this easy? Maybe she does love me enough to forgive me a second time.”

Alexis took the flowers, smelled the bouquet, and dumped it into the trash can. “You can stick your flowers up your ass and never talk to me again! Then you and little Miss Teeny-bopper can ‘discover your love’ together. You can take her to see the latest boy-band and drink Cokes together as she shakes her Tremors’ boobs in your face.” Alexis took a deep breath, “You make me sick!”

Alexis jumped in a cab and had the cabby drive the two blocks to the garage where her car was parked, giving the cabby a decent tip for the short ride.

Alexis drove back to her sister’s, changed into her running gear and ran for miles. By the time she returned to the house, her sister and brother-in-law, Kyle, were home. Alexis told them about the meeting with the attorney, the public altercation with Matt and that he’d be served with divorce papers on Friday.

It was her brother-in-law that caught it. interrupting. “Wait, Matt met you at the café with flowers? How did he know where to find you?”

“My god, I never thought of that.”

Kyle reached out. “Let me see your phone.”

Kyle hit a few buttons. “Did you know you have a tracking app on your phone?”

“I didn’t put it there.”

“Matt probably did. Probably to make certain you weren’t following him when he met his teen friend. Or maybe to keep track if you were doing to him what he was doing to you. That’s the thing with cheaters – if you can’t trust yourself to be faithful, how can you trust your mate?”

While they were talking, Kyle was busy with Alexis’ phone. “There, it’s removed.”

Matt was served Friday; called Alexis at least every other day, begging for forgiveness and promising to be faithful for the rest of their lives together. Alexis didn’t give in a second time and within six months, the divorce was final.

But, not before Matt’s attorney requested and the judge ordered three counseling sessions for the couple. The counseling sessions were positive for Alexis in one way; she learned Matt’s serial adultery had little to do with her. In the end, it had more to do with Matt’s lack of self-esteem, not anything lacking in her love for him. All his machismo was compensation for the bullying he endured growing up; by his brother, school mates and others. His first high school girlfriend dumped him soon after their first time ‘making love’ and started dating his former best friend.

The poor guy ends up dating, wooing and marrying Alexis, a truly beautiful woman, beautiful inside and out. He never realizes he’s captured the heart of a wonderful, faithful, loving woman and their breakup

is a self-fulfilling prophecy because of his subsequent actions. Matt would still be married to Alexis if he just believed in her.

It was a year later, six months after her divorce was finalized, Alexis' sister called one afternoon with an invitation to a dinner party Saturday night. "Dress comfortably, but nice; I have someone I want you to meet."

"Another of your set ups?" Alexis asked. This was the third guy her sister wanted her to meet.

"This guy is different, you'll like him. He's smart, successful and not full of himself."

"This sounds like the male equivalent of 'a great personality'." Alexis was laughing as she said it but agreed to be there.

The dinner party was a success and Alexis accepted John's invitation to go to a show and dinner the following weekend.

John Farnsworth rang the bell, holding a bouquet of fall Asters in his hand. Alexis opened the door wearing a beautiful navy-blue dress and three-inch heels. As John stepped into the house, he was eye-to-eye with Alexis' stunning blue eyes.

"You look fabulous." he said.

Alexis took the bouquet in one hand and played with John's lapel with the other.

"And you look very smart yourself. Let me get these in water."

John was almost – almost – embarrassed to watch Alexis' shapely ass in that dress as she walked away into the kitchen. And those legs - outstanding.

As John helped Alexis on with her coat, she decided to get it out of the way now, so she asked, "I wore heels, is that going to be a problem?"

John was a bit surprised by the question and wondered if he had time to scalp these damn theatre tickets if she was trying to back out of their date; maybe she regretted accepting now that she was standing close to him. "No, I like looking into your eyes this way. Is it going to be a problem being escorted by a guy my height?"

Alexis was embarrassed. "Look, I'm sorry. I dated a guy last month about your height and he asked me to wear flats. I didn't even think of it until you came to the door. I just didn't want to come off as a bitch; I suck at dating – ask my sister, she'll tell you."

John laughed, even though he wondered if this made her more uncomfortable, it was all too ludicrous. "OK, can we start over?"

"Yes, please."

"Let's go, or we'll be late." John took her arm and walked her to his car, holding the door open for her.

John headed downtown, looking over at Alexis. "Do you have issues with dating a guy my height? Especially a guy who loves the way your legs look in those heels?"

Alexis was starting to realize why her sister was so anxious to get her together with this guy.

"My ex-husband was six-one and a cheating asshole. You're what, five-ten? And seem like a great guy."

"I am a great guy, but five-nine, thank you." John said it in jest. "But that wasn't enough for my last serious relationship. She needed more height."

"Well, she was as stupid as my ex."

"Maybe we should introduce them to each other."

"Only if we get them neutered first so they can't procreate. There are enough stupid people in the world."

John was already starting to like this woman.

Over dinner, John ended up telling her about his aborted marriage proposal.

Alexis reached out and gave John's hand a squeeze. "That's awful, but at least you found out before walking down the aisle. I found out three years into our relationship that behind all his bravado a frightened little boy was lurking who needed constant reinforcement of his worth, especially his sexual worth. After his second 'indiscretion', at least the second I learned of, it was time to cut my losses. So, here I am, twenty-four and divorced. I've dated four men since the divorce and I'm so socially awkward that I almost blow off the best date of my life with my stupid comment about my heels. Can you ever forgive me?"

Now it was John's turn to reach across and hold Alexis' hand. He found it hard to believe that this gorgeous woman with such a kind heart was asking for his forgiveness. Alexis was looking across the table and somehow knew – this is the man I'm going to marry, have children and grow old together. It was the beginning of a beautiful relationship.

Seven months later, on a warm Spring night, John asked Alexis if she would marry him – Alexis wrapped her arms around John's neck and said, "yes" before kissing him with passion. Two months later, a County Judge married Alexis North to John Farnsworth in an intimate ceremony on his parents' back lawn.

My phone rang and it shook me out of my second daydream. Looking at the phone, I was pleased to see it was my husband calling.

"Hi, babe." I answered.

"Katie, where are you?"

"Sitting at Sullivan's, having a drink and daydreaming. Where are you?"

"I came home early. I called your office and they said you took off after lunch. I decided to come home and surprise you. Thought we could have an early cocktail, then an early dinner, then maybe an early bedtime."

"Sam - you dog – are you trying to get into my panties?"

“The thought occurred to me. It’s your birthday and I wanted to give you something special.”

“Special as in what you gave me last night and the night before?”

“No, this is really special - I bought some of those magic pills advertised on late night TV. Tonight, you get King Kong.” Sam barely got the words out before busting up laughing at his own joke.

Gawd, I love this man. His sense of humor, the way he always thinks of me first, how it feels when he wraps those arms around me. I think it’s time I gave him the one thing he’s wanted for the past year.

He interrupted my chain of thought. “What are you doing, besides having a drink?”

“You know me, hubby - letting my imagination wander.”

“When are you going to write any of these stories down and let me read them?”

“What, and let my husband know he married a pervert?”

“Why not? That way I’ll know we belong together, two perverts hopelessly in love. Come on home, I’ll prove it to you.”

“I’ll pay my tab. I’m a Negroni or two ahead of you. Have a drink and I’ll be home in twenty minutes. Call for Thai; we’ll get naked and feed each other Pad Thai and spring rolls.”

Knowing my husband was waiting for me, I decided to splurge by taking an Uber instead of the bus. While I waited for the Uber to show, I called up my gynecologist’s office to make an appointment and have my IUD removed. With luck, Sam will be a father by this time next year.