

THE MOLDY FIG
by
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The neon window sign illuminated the antiseptic reception area. A young, plain looking college-aged brunette greeted me. She was a hostess of some sort.

“Massage?” she asked.

“Ah, yeah,” I said. “Why not?”

“Thirty-five dollars for half-hour, forty for an hour,” she said.

“Hour sounds like the way to go. A bargain, almost.”

“I’ll be back with the girls,” she said, then walked through a crooked archway and turned down a dank hall.

I wasn't exactly sure what I had gotten myself into at this point. I was from out of town and had no idea whether or not this was a legitimate massage parlor or a brothel; not that I've been to either. She returned in several minutes with only herself and a pretty blonde with curly hair, about twenty-five.

"It's just me or her," she said.

Fuck, this is awkward I thought to myself. Wasn't there supposed to be several girls? And why was she one of the choices? I was more attracted to the blonde but I was worried I'd hurt the hostess' feelings.

She must have read the anxiety on my face. "It's ok," the hostess said. "Enjoy."

The receptionist walked back behind the desk and the blonde took my hand and pulled me down the hall. A nervous pang shot through my stomach.

Several months ago, I approached the mailbox of my pre-war walk up. The foyer stunk like urine as usual because the super kept his cat's litter box outside his door down the hall. I was comfortable in my camouflage shorts, Boston University hoodie and sliders. I carted the junk mail and catalogues up the four flights of creaky stairs to apartment 4F. I've been renting here with my wife Sharon since we got married, about six years ago. It's only a matter of time until our landlord raises the rent and

we'll be forced to move out of Manhattan to an outer borough; some not yet hip section of Brooklyn.

I spend most of my waking hours as a low level copyright editor for an independent magazine that targets expectant mothers and is distributed to OB/GYN's around the tri-state area. I studied journalism at Boston University and always dreamed of being an on-air correspondent. Unfortunately I found the news industry impossible to crack, so I settled for a copywriting job at an ad agency to make ends meet. Now I make a living mastering head and cutlines.

I met Sharon at Weiden + Kennedy eight years ago; she was an administrative assistant for my boss, Colin. We bonded over his shortcomings, of which there were many. After one particularly stressful day, I asked Sharon to meet me for cocktails down the block at the Bookmarks Bar on Madison. I couldn't believe she actually said 'yes.' We ordered Manhattans and agreed not to mention our boss' name during the course of conversation; we turned it into a game actually. If one of us mentioned him, the other would have to take a shot of Powers Irish Whiskey. We all but forgot we were in the advertising business for three hours, let alone worked for the same boss. We shot more Powers and as the evening wound down, Sharon dared me to rent a room in the attached Library hotel. *'Was this really happening?'* I wondered. Without hesitation I checked in and the two of us screwed our brains out until the morning. We both showed up to work the next day wearing the same clothes as the day before, no one noticing or caring.

I'm no longer in advertising, but I continue to copyright. Meanwhile, Sharon, who was a Liberal Arts major in college, has been steadily ascending through the advertising ranks at Weiden. Ironically, Sharon says Colin's not such a bad guy once you get to know him. *'What the fuck do I know?'*

Back at home in my apartment, I sat on the couch flipping through the mail. I noticed one particular envelope and excitedly called my wife over. My short film, *The Moldy Fig*, a film about barbershop quartet aficionados that are upset over the evolution of the medium, had been accepted into the New Hampshire International Film Festival.

I read the letter out loud to Sharon: "Dear Filmmaker. Congratulations, your short film, *The Moldy Fig*, has been chosen out of over 5,000 submissions to be one of 120 films selected to compete at the New Hampshire International Film Festival.

Screenings will take place October 10-12."

Not missing a beat she scoffed, "But that's the last weekend before my parents close down the beach house for the season."

We spent almost every single weekend of the summer at her parents' vacation house in Sag Harbor. It was getting old for me; same old shit, same old uppity assholes. Here I had just created an opportunity for myself; a chance to prove to

myself I was an artist - a filmmaker, maybe. I can only be so fucking creative proofing headlines. That's the whole reason I sunk our savings into this film. I wouldn't admit it to her, but this was also a chance to break out of the emotional rut I'd been in for the last year.

One month later, Sharon went to Sag Harbor and I rented a Zip car and drove up alone to Portsmouth. When I arrived, I checked in at the artist table where I was greeted with smiles and congratulated for making a great film. *Are they talking about me?* People remarked how they didn't know the barbershop quartet was not only alive and well, but the genus was so fraught with friction. The Director of the festival went out of his way to thank me for attending in person and announced that my movie will be paired up with five other shorts, and together, the collection will screen three times over the weekend. The screenings all went well and I was inundated with questions while standing on stage for the Q&A after each one. I felt like a rock star.

On closing night I attended a party at a local brewery. I posed for photos with my newfound friends, some of whom traveled all the way from Europe for the opportunity to show their work in public. My film even won the Audience Award and I was pronounced an 'Artist to Watch.' I was the belle of the ball. I celebrated, drank shots with fellow movie geeks and even took a hit of a joint offered to me by the festival Director.

High on life and more likely the weed, I stumbled my way back toward my hotel on historic Main Street. Before I could enter the lobby, I noticed a storefront with a neon 'Open' sign blinking in the window. A plain looking college-aged girl stood behind a reception desk. I made my way inside. Within five minutes of entering this place I never knew existed, a pretty young blonde was leading me down a narrow hallway.

"Shower?" she asked.

"Nah, I'm alright," I said.

She walked me into a small puke green fluorescent room.

"Take off everything and lie on your tummy," she said. "I'll be right back."

I contemplated taking off, but then I'd have to run past the hostess who I just blew off and I was too high to face. So instead, I stripped down to my ankle socks. I lied on my stomach, shut my eyes and took in the 80's music playing from a boom box. I heard the door creak open and took a deep breath when I suddenly I felt her touch, stroking my thigh. It was one of the shittiest massages I had ever gotten. It didn't feel good. And it didn't feel sexual either. So I opened my eyes.

"What's your name?" I asked.

“Jennifer,” she said.

And for the first time, I picked up on what sounded like a speech impediment. Was she partly deaf? *What the fuck is going on?*

She continued to nonchalantly and routinely stroke my thigh. To distract myself, I decided to have a conversation with her.

“You from around here?” I asked.

“Long time ago,” she said. “I just moved back from Newport. Moved back in with my parents.”

Any hope of me getting a hard-on was now completely out the window.

“In Newport all we did was party,” she said.

“We, as in you and your boyfriend?” I asked.

“Hah, no I don’t have no boyfriend,” she laughed. “I have a twin sister. And all we did there was get high. And there comes a time when you have to decide, party or

be responsible, you know? I couldn't party no more. I wanted to go the straight and narrow, so I left."

At this point I could tell she was a little off, kept repeating herself. She was the kind of girl that probably went to resource room and was made fun of in high school.

"So, you're living with your parents, working here?" I asked. "This is the straight and narrow?"

"Yup," she said.

"Why no boyfriend?" I asked.

"Oh god. I don't know," she said. "I can't connect to anyone, ya know?"

She and I had a lot common. I mean, I couldn't really connect with anyone either.

"Why's that?" I asked. "You have a good relationship with your parents?"

"I guess," she said. "They let me live there, but I don't know. Guys, just, I don't know. They don't make sense to me."

"Do you like girls?" I asked.

“That’s gross,” she said. “No.”

“Do you drink?” I asked.

“Not when I work,” she said. “That would be irresponsible, ya know?”

“That’s good,” I said. “Shows maturity. You should feel good about that.”

“Yeah, that’s why I left Newport,” she said. “All they do there is have sex and party, and I didn’t want to party no more.”

“Great. You’ve come a long way,” I said. I envied her moral compass, as original as it was.

She smiled proudly. Probably doesn’t have many people saying supportive things to her. I decided to break the awkward thigh rub with a question that I instantly regretted asking.

“Hey, would you mind rubbing my back? That leg thing isn’t really doing it for me.”

“You’re funny,” she said. “Do you think it’s weird that I don’t have a boyfriend?”

“No, I think it’s whatever feels right to you at the moment,” I said. “You shouldn’t feel pressured by society, or whatever your sister or your friends are doing.”

“You know what I think? I think you’re really smart,” she said.

“I think you should be paying me for therapy,” I said. “I shouldn’t be paying you. You ever think about going to see a therapist?”

“No. You think I should?” she asked.

“I do,” I said. “I think as soon as you’re done with this session, you should go find a therapist and run, not jog.”

She smirked as she let that comment sink in. It felt good to give someone advice and even better to have someone ask for it. She continued to lamely rub my back. After a minute or two she said, “Roll on your back.”

She pulled her tube top over her head, revealing her natural twenty-five year old perfect C-cup tits.

“Happy ending?” she asked.

Without saying a word, I gave a half smile. She reached over to a nearby table and squirts two pumps of oil into her hands, rubbed them together and grabbed my joint. After about a minute, I sat up.

“Everything ok?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s all good,” I said.

She reached down between my legs but I had to stop her.

“No, it’s ok,” I said. “You don’t have to.”

I reached in and gave her a hug. I squeezed her tight and didn’t want to let her go. She squeezed me back. We embraced for what seemed like five minutes. Finally, I released her.

“I needed that,” she said.

“Me too,” I said.

“Time’s up,” she said.

Driving along I-95 was therapeutic until I reached the jammed Bruckner Expressway. I couldn't wait to return the Zip car and share my festival win with Sharon. By now, my hangover had worn off, thank god.

I opened the door to my apartment carrying a trophy and noticed Sharon hurrying around with a bag over her shoulder.

"Oh, you're home," she said. "The painter is coming to give an estimate in an hour and I'm running out to get a pedicure."

"Ok. So, you'll be back after that?" I asked.

"Yes. Right after I meet Janet for dinner," she said.

She gave me a peck on the cheek and headed out the door. I walked over to the bay window overlooking the upper eastside. I noticed three women taking a break from work, smoking cigarettes. I stared at my trophy, walked over to the kitchen and tossed it in the trashcan. I needed to take a walk.

I crossed the street and approached the women I was watching from the window.

"Can I trouble one of you for a cigarette?" I asked.

One of the women reached into her pocketbook and handed me one. Another offered a light.

“I appreciate it. My name’s Jason,” I said.

“Andrea,” she said.

“You from around here?” I asked.
