

## First, Unbecoming

By MaxieJane Frazier

By the time I was pointing to my road-rashed, bloody leg and shrieking “This is the physical manifestation of what you’ve done to my heart,” my husband had already fallen in love with a molecular biologist at the Army Institute of Research. Their romance had bloomed over toxic rat testicles probably more than four years before this moment.

I didn’t know. I wouldn’t know for a few more years and a lot of Googling. And then, when I emailed him condolences about his mother’s death, mentioning that I knew why he’d left me, he still refused to admit to the facts that I now know are true. But if the person listed as co-author on a couple of his articles is now listed as co-owner on his home, it’s not rocket science. Or microbiology.

Yet, I’m not as angry as I make it sound. Let me tell the story this way.

Just months before my final military deployment, this time to Kyrgyzstan, I still jogged every other morning with my estranged husband. My previous deployment to Afghanistan more than four years earlier afforded him the opportunity to grow close to the microbiologist and, over the course of our assignment in Colorado, to choose her over me. He played the long game. At the end of our time in Colorado, he asked for a divorce saying, “I just don’t want to be married anymore.”

We went to counseling. He said he would try. We moved near D.C. and my husband’s job in Silver Spring, Maryland. A few months later we separated. Maryland requires a one-year separation before divorce papers can be filed. Another waiting period.

Despite the oppressive pain and weight of his desertion—his not wanting to be married at all, which only felt as if he didn’t want to be married to me—we finished out our mornings before work as I prepared to leave for Kyrgyzstan the same way we had spent so many of them over our fourteen years of marriage: running in the dark. He wanted me to be safe. Me jogging alone under the pre-dawn streetlights and onto unlit trails just outside of Washington D.C. was unthinkable; we were amicable in that way. Put another way, he wanted to be blameless. In the same way that marking time at the marriage counselors would make him seem blameless. Outwardly he’d said, “Yes, I’ll work on this marriage.” But it was just one more moment of dissimulation, all the while waiting behind the stone-gray walls of his eyes.

Finally, after the counseling, the move, the months, I sat on that couch on December 30th, not aware our marriage was actually dissolving right then, and I said, “Are you really so unhappy? I think we choose our happiness.”

“Well, you have to admit it’s different,” he said.

“Have you tried looking at the positives we have together?”

“Do you want more wine?”

Years before, my best friend had told me that he never directly answered any of my questions. I hadn’t realized she was right until I paid attention.

I didn’t want more wine. I wanted him to just try.

“I love you,” I said. “And if being with me makes you that miserable, maybe you should leave.”

If I were to make a film of this moment, the next 24 hours would have happened in fast forward. Jerky quick steps. The smooth rapidity of a thought out plan. My memory has him leaping into action. It turned out, while I was at a literary conference in Texas in November, he’d rented an apartment only a few blocks from his work. He’d bought himself a bed. When I was denied access to one of his bank accounts while I was traveling, my instincts had tingled.



“I’m not divorcing you,” he’d said from the living room in Silver Spring where it would end. “It was just a mistake. I pushed the wrong button.”

He had been repeatedly reassuring me for months that he was not going to divorce me, even as he was setting his plans in motion. In Colorado, having started the process that would enable him to move to a new job in D.C., he began to say that we were in trouble.

That was the only time he literally asked for a divorce. If only I had listened. If only I had realized that once someone digs up the courage to ask, it’s over.

Instead, I cried. We went to counseling. We did workbooks. I think somewhere, unconscious and unacknowledged, I knew he was only going through the motions.

“You better not let me leave my favorite job, favorite home, favorite life, and then divorce me,” I said. Why didn’t I see he was already gone?

“I’m not going to divorce you.”

I found a job in the Pentagon, quit the favorite job and the favorite life I also loved. I committed to a 45-minute Metro ride every morning and night from the Maryland suburbs instead of pulling up to our five rural acres in Colorado with my horse in the barn out back. I wanted to save our marriage.

When we made it to Silver Spring, living in the house chosen for its proximity to his work, he kept up the ruse, until that late December evening when he manipulated me into giving him his out. Why didn’t he just “grab a gonad,” as we say in the military, and own up to leaving me before making the move to D.C.? Or why didn’t I just let him go when he asked?

The next day, New Year’s Eve, when he shuttled his goods to his new apartment, my friend came over and served me chilled white wine while we watched *Failure to Launch*. She lived an hour away, yet between then and my April departure for Kyrgyzstan, I was never alone. My dog, Jake, pushed his brown and white face into my hands. My cats, Tater and Magoo, perched on my chest as if to hold together my broken heart.

I knew I didn’t have a choice about anything, even keeping myself moving. No matter how his words made the moment a slow-motion nightmare—him the monster right behind me, divorce papers raised—I knew I would survive.

Yes, I thought about suicide, but not in the way you would think. Instead, I thought to myself, *This is about as low as I ever remember being. Is this when people commit suicide? But no, not that. Not for me. Then . . . what?* I also really didn’t want to live. Not for that time. But I think I was just tired. Unwilling. I knew how hard it would be to keep going. *Just let me sleep for a few years.*

After work and after listening to audiobooks while knitting on the Metro ride home, I would open the door to a wagging tail and yowling cats. I wanted to recline in the soft chair and let them settle on me, feeling their warmth that I called love.

In that place inside me where my principles hide, wrapped like secrets even I don’t usually know, one of my platitudes was clear: If I loved my husband, I had to set him free. It sounded clichéd, but I believed that if living with me made him so miserable, then making him not miserable was an act of love. I needed to let him go. That’s what I did.

I had no sense of peace in doing what I knew to be the right thing. My bitterness was palpable. I was embarrassed. I was commonplace, joining the ranks of all the people who had been cast aside by someone who had promised, “Until death do us part.” I wasn’t worthy.

I had to stay upright, walking the stiff walk of the unwanted, and allow time to pass. I had to keep moving.

First, I would cook. I had lived alone before. I knew the pitfalls of an open pantry. I cooked purposefully. Healthfully. Especially anything I thought he would hate. Maybe this spiteful quality I so easily turned to had something to do with his departure. At the time, I blamed my changing, aging body for his late December words: “I just don’t want to be married.” Only later



would I remember that, as usual, he made me say what ended us: *If you're so unhappy, maybe you really should go live somewhere else.* Now it's clear: he had worked for years to manipulate those words out of me, his microbiologist and rat testicles waiting in the wings. Part of me suspects that he wanted to have everything organized perfectly, a soft place for him to land, before he pushed hard enough for me to release him. And that, somehow, he needed my permission.

Cooking passed the time between work and bed. With my furry companions at my feet one night, I found myself roasting cubes of butternut squash and steaming edamame. In the small preparation space made appealing by the solid table-turned-butcher block next to the gas stove, I fried tofu and transformed solid coconut milk and Thai green curry paste into a creamy pan sauce, pouring it over meaty sushi rice in my mismatched Italian pottery. I sensed a shift in the pressure suffocating me as I padded over the hardwood floors, transporting my one-person feast to the couch. I tasted the curry tang. The winter bones of the hickory trees carved shadows through the streetlights. My red wine softened the edges of the room. The bitter taste of failure faded behind coconut milk and tannins. I'm not saying that the bitterness wasn't still there when I slid between my sheets that night, but I had learned it could lessen.

My future-ex-husband and I exchanged few words during our dark-then-dawning runs. I remember him saying "You will be fine."

*What kind of bullshit statement is that?* Fourteen years of marriage. We'd celebrated our anniversary in the fall, just a few months before he left. He had promised, then while walking through deep, papery dead leaves, that he would try. It became January and those same autumn leaves were still underfoot, wet and flattened, cushioning our steps and making the cars on the distant parkway the only sound. He was finished trying. I had no other option than to be "fine." I knew he was right. But that didn't give him the right to say it to me.

One black morning, so uncharacteristically warm that I wore shorts, my abrupt fall over an uplifted sidewalk square felt like a crash: a skidding ending I couldn't get up from. I screamed about the rash and my heart.

I got up.

We finished the next three miles in silence, blood dripping down my leg. He came back to our rented house with me and used his veterinary skills to clean and treat my wounds.

I would have taken him back.

The thing is, I also couldn't have known how, in my own long game, there would be budding birch trees under high blue skies. That there would be a leap in my heart at the sight of a perfect stranger: a recognition.

That I'd be happy he had stopped trying. That I'd be so grateful he was gone.

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## Discussion Questions

1. How does the portrayal of the ex-husband color the audience's understanding of the author?
2. How does the narrator's fall frame the story and operate metaphorically within it?
3. What does the author reveal about contemporary culture in the context of this dual-military marriage break up?
4. Why do you think food preparation becomes a theme in this work?
5. What insight to military practices do we have if we know the Army studies toxic rat testicles?
6. Why does the author eschew a strict, linear recounting of events? What does this authorial choice accomplish?
7. What effect does the repetition of "rat testicles" have in this piece?
8. How does the author use a dark setting to convey her experience?
9. In what ways does this character's individualized pain become universal and sympathetic to readers?
10. What do we think we know about this narrator by the end of the piece?

