

Laurie Granieri

## LEAVING THE BODY

Three years into our marriage, when my husband admits that he hadn't wanted to have sex on our wedding night, I see the books. He sits framed by a wall of them, his books, my books, our books, from Allende to Woolf, lined up in the living room. These are the bookshelves I'd aspired to whenever I imagined making a home, the room that gave me such pleasure on long walks as I glimpsed it from the street. From the outside, at least, this room resembled the life I'd dreamed of.

But I feel no dominion over these bookshelves, this scene of buttery lamplight poured warm across the thick rug and the muscled leather couch. As he speaks, I'm as good as locked out, exiled to the wrong side of a stubborn doorknob.

I can't open anything tonight.

And I can't force the poets at my husband's back to spoon love into his mouth. Mary Oliver stuffs herself with the dark joy of August blackberries; Sharon Olds gropes her first boyfriend in the front seat of a used Chevy; in our wedding poem, e.e. cummings swears that I am greeted by sunlight and singing. But all that elation remains shelved and smothered, pressed flat between book covers. The words my husband utters are his own, yanking me back each time my thoughts dart to *Maybe we can work it out*.

We've been living apart for a few weeks, dithering, hoping. But now, facing my husband and the books, spines straight as

Sunday morning, I manage something like: *We have nothing to salvage here*. No use mentioning a time before we marry, when he pursues and flatters me, marveling at my body from the foot of an unmade bed one morning before work and dubbing me “Perf”; declaring on our first date that we’ll marry, of course we will; purchasing a copy of Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s short stories so we can read to each other before bed, feeding each other the sweetness of language; proposing to me in my favorite piazza in my favorite Italian city. He proffers a grandiosity that I am more than happy to drink straight down in a single gulp, no questions asked, perhaps because I meet him only a year after my father dies.

When we first meet, he looks like the beginning of a happy ending. He makes me think that perhaps my life can finally right itself and follow a redemptive narrative—the one in which the gut punch delivers a gift, and the untimely death gives way to life-affirming love.

I am 27 years old, wrung out on grieving, hungry to believe in anything.

My husband, who lost his dad almost a year to the day before mine and whose mother suffers a fatal heart infection just as we begin dating, surely is starved for a kind turn too.

This means our impending divorce adds up to more than a severed legal contract or even a broken heart: It means I’ve done the math wrong. I am forced to relinquish hope for a benevolent celestial arithmetic, an invisible hand balancing the scales. Such magical thinking, the universe consenting to pay damages: *We remove one father, deal you one soulmate*.

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Now, his admission prompts me to file divorce papers. Not only does he evince zero interest in sex—I can count on one

hand how many times we've had sex during our marriage—he does not even graze my arm or hold my hand. Moment by moment, my skin has been denied.

What does it mean to live in a neglected body, to lie down, night after night, beside the one you love, the one who claims to love you back, but who only seems to love you in pieces? *I love your taste, I love your brain, but not your body. I love your eyes but not your ankles.* It means my cruel inner voice, the cold, impatient one that has spoken to me since childhood, now lives on the outside, in my husband's mouth, only the voice doesn't come off as cold or impatient—the cruelty, the critical appraisal, arrives in the voice of my beloved. When he deals verbal blows, he sounds a little like Hugh Grant in a '90s rom com: confused, curious, bashful.

And yet, that same halting voice threatens to unravel the storyline I had followed—believed—without question since our first date: that he is The One, forever and ever, Amen, that he is devoted, ensorcelled, my ride-or-die. I believed—and how, despite the evidence, despite the truth his body tells, do I dismantle this faith? Though I may have dropped certain tenets of my Roman Catholic faith tradition, I hold fast to that biblical notion that faith is “belief in things not yet seen.” My grandmother insisted I'd know when I met The One, and when I meet him, slyly funny, well-read, a great blues guitarist with a stutter that conjures the “Aw, shucks” of Jimmy Stewart, I *know*. When we work as journalists in the newsroom of a local newspaper, he slips handwritten love notes across the office cubicle like tiny white birds. We are inevitable. I even love his feet, and I've never loved anyone's feet, even if I adore the rest of them.

I am convinced—me, who never, from the time I was a little girl, dreamt of marriage or children. When I was 8, 9 years old, I announced: “I'm having kittens, not babies.” I was

never particularly drawn to marriage, but then, oh, this man, he tells me such a beautiful story: that I am Perf, that he is devoted, that he is amazed, that he is lucky. We select baby names for an unwritten but hoped-for future: Lucia, after his mother; Christian, just because.

And now, the story he tells me all through our nearly two-year courtship turns out to be a lie? Lucia and Christian must disappear?

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What does it mean to be lonely when you're not alone—to sit beside your husband and feel abandoned, unaccompanied? The origin of the word companion is, literally, “with bread.” A companion serves as bread for the journey, behaves like a poem, if we are to believe Mary Oliver, who declared poetry to be as “necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry.”

A companion sustains us. I have so many books, so many friends, I have cats and long walks to sustain me, I have prayer and a built-in tendency toward wonder. I marvel at the whistling voice of the wind, at the creak of the settling house in the middle of the night. Nothing is wasted on me. If I am to marry, my husband must offer bread, and before we marry, he does.

Now, night after night, I am hungry, so goddamned hungry.

I savor a chosen solitude. But when it comes to my husband, I am lonely not just in that bed, but lonely when I collapse at a concert and he asks someone else to escort me to the ladies room to be checked out while he turns back to They Might Be Giants, lonely when he says the world likely regards me as “pretty but not beautiful,” lonely when he judges me a “good” writer but not one with a special gift, lonely when I try on

a dress to wear to a wedding then begin weeping because I hate being naked, I hate regarding myself in the mirror, I hate confronting the fact of my body. If only I could rush past this body each morning, when showering, when dressing. The body, and all that I perceive as wrong with the body, condemns me.

If only I could divorce this body, untether myself, float weightless, above it all.

I no longer desire sex—I desire disappearance. Lord, let me dissolve into the mattress. How many Saturday mornings do I beg my husband to talk about our problems, about *the* problem? How many times does it feel as if he places my emotions in front of a fun house mirror and declares that I am surely overreacting?

Still, a crumb of nostalgia lodges in my throat. Because while I refuse to live like roommates any longer, I relish morning coffee with him, the silly voices we use on the cat. The one intimacy that has flourished between us lies in a shared vernacular. Now we'll be forced to retire a shorthand of nicknames and inside jokes.

But wedding-night recollections lurch in, their sweetness spoiling in the heat of his living-room confession: the pizza delivery box on the hotel bed, the Subway Series flickering blue on the TV, my stiff wedding dress on display, planted in the darkened corner like a museum mannequin, holding itself upright even without me inside.

I see my hopeful self, primping for him in the bathroom. Shame spreads like a rash. Because as my husband concealed his dread and consummated our marriage, I trusted him—trusted *us*—and suspected nothing. Now I mentally scour that hotel room for clues, desperate to crack a code. Each

time I remember, I must dismember, I must dissect the details of that night and all other nights, then recast them all—but especially this one—in the light of what he has disclosed.

There I am, rooting around in the muck of our courtship, scouring for anything that might turn up, slap my cheek, and hiss, *Fool, here it is. You should have known. Don't you see?*

No, I don't see. The gimlet-eyed reporter never saw, heard, or touched the truth—that, for some reason he can't explain, by our wedding night he was no longer attracted to me.

*Maybe because you gained a few pounds?*

*Maybe because you have too much body hair?*

These are the questions my husband poses each time I press him about why we're not having sex. He doesn't hurl an insult so much as he suggests an insult, as if I might produce the answer for both of us. Not only does my husband deny me the release of sex—he denies me the release of a raging response to his insults. I suppose he hopes that I will affirm and complete my own degradation. He hands me the blade, and I make the cut.

Accepting the judgments my husband renders is, in a strange way, a means of regaining control. If I just blame myself for this mess, I can write myself a mental Post-It, I can remind myself of what not to do so that this misery never dares to revisit my life. I will fool-proof myself. Otherwise, I'm left holding too many questions that my husband can't seem to answer: When was the beginning of the end? How did it happen? Why did you lie for so long?

Yes, on the face of it, I am indignant. How dare he. But also, I'm ashamed. I've failed to live up to his "Perf" designation,

I've broken the unspoken bargain he struck when we were dating: You're Perf, I'm devoted.

As far as I'm concerned, that Marriott hotel room is a chamber of secrets.

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Or maybe that's not quite right. I can't recall what I eat that morning on our Parisian honeymoon—pastries? Yogurt? But I can summon every bite of another couple's breakfast. The flavors rise in my imagination like sap in the maple: half a baguette slathered with jam and butter; cups of café au lait; fresh-squeezed orange juice bright as Provencal sunflowers in July; a hard-boiled egg.

The conspiratorial gleam, the canoodlers' listing heads and shoulders forming a human tent—that sweet shelter doesn't belong to me, not anymore, not with him. In the yearlong gap between his marriage proposal and our honeymoon, this man's hunger for me has been sated. He's distracted, nursing a cold, and practically pushing his plate away, as if to say, *Check, please.*

I'm certain the man and woman in the café are lovers, because their intertwined bodies appear carved from the same tree. And already, on my honeymoon, taken six weeks after our wedding ceremony, I suspect that my husband and I are not carved from the same tree.

I could dismiss the canoodlers as stereotypically French, but my scratch of hunger says otherwise. And I'm certain, just as I'm certain of my own two hands, that the lovers have recently emerged from a tangle of sheets. As I write this sentence, the memory of us in the cafe strikes like a warning bell, ringing out the end. But in the moment, this clarity feels more like a pinch than a punch.

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Somebody once told me that choosing to marry isn't an act of love, but an act of faith; same with leaving. When I first consider divorcing my husband, a vague notion tugs at me—that life's got to be better than this.

No pictures, plans, or people attach themselves to this hunch. I do not feel certain, steady, or brave. Mostly, I feel duped, shamed, and sexless. But during those few times my brain ceases its churning, the same four words muscle their way to the top. They whisper: *I hate my life*.

The period sandwiched between marriage and divorce feels like a land without borders, deprived of fixed coordinates. I'm plunked down there, craning to hear the coda, listening hard for the "Amen" that never comes. I momentarily soften when he claims that he "loves coming home" to me. I suggest a couples' therapist, to which he replies, "That'll take a while, won't it?" I realize that if I leave it up to my husband, we'll rot on the vine for another three years. I decide on the divorce for both of us, and he goes along. Absence—of passion, fight—has presence.

I hire Arlene, a brassy, recently widowed lawyer who continues to sport a serious engagement ring. Her face darkens as I lay out my reasons for leaving.

Arlene is all hard edges: crisp power suits, sharp elbows, straight-shooting answers, zero soft skills. And she's exactly what I need—a bracing change from my husband, who claims he loves me but can't seem to make me *feel* loved. Arlene is brusque—under duress, she would weaponize that diamond—but she makes me a promise before reverting to her gruff demeanor.

“We’ll get you out of this.”

I believe her. And she believes me. I had worried that she’d dismiss me as a fool. But Arlene seems to view me as someone who needs to cut her losses.

My husband crashes on his brother’s sofa and digs into—of all things—Jonathan Franzen’s “How To Be Alone.” I ready the condo for sale and immerse myself in—of all things—Johnny Cash’s autobiography. I fail to coax a moment’s peace from the books I’ve loved so long, books that have so long loved me back. Even the children’s stories refuse me: Jean Little and Lucy Maud Montgomery won’t yield one drop of mother’s milk tonight. But the cliché of Cash’s resurrection story—the addictions, the divorce, the comeback—comforts me.

I feel safest in bed. But between wolfing down Cheerios for dinner and burrowing beneath the covers with Cash’s book and our cat, Phoebe, I seek out solidarity in a divorce support group meeting at a local church. When the other women (we’re all women) listen to my story, they appear mystified—or worse, unmoved. *Why are you even bothering to leave this guy?* they seem to be saying. They’re drowning in a quagmire of closeted gay spouses, young children and restraining orders. Besides, freedom must be bought, and some of these women likely can’t afford to leave their husbands. From where they sit in the sharing circle, my situation lacks a compelling narrative. It’s Divorce Lite.

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My husband and I spend a long Saturday interviewing real estate agents. We fear that admitting the sale is part of a divorce settlement will result in low-ball offers, so we agree to act like a contented couple planning for a future together.

We park ourselves side-by-side at the dining room table for hours, all easy smiles and witty banter. We fall back on those old moves with astonishing ease. We play Happy. But Happy exhausts me. The charade pokes at the wound, arouses an ache for the real thing, even though I now second-guess my memory, my sanity, even: Did I ever experience the real thing with my husband? Did I create or gin up his love? Did I grab a sliver of affection and run with it?

Maybe. But if I did, he ran right alongside me.

On another Saturday, we meet at our favorite coffee shop, weep, and make lists. He gets the fancy espresso machine I never figured out how to work; I get the good couch.

I'm not feeling generous. I want everything.

I tuck notes into a book, a legal pad, items he's likely to come across years later. I want to haunt him.

The notes say, "Why did you let me go?"

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And if I could, I'd strip him from my story, take up an old toothbrush, scrub each line clean of him and have Johnny Cash sing me a murder ballad afterward.

But this is true too: I can't deny the longing I feel to pluck six syllables from my husband's mouth that day in court five months later, as he stands before a bored judge to state his name: the six syllables that I am certain singe him with shame because of the stutter. Speaking in public terrifies him, exposing the stutter to strangers' judgment; having to pronounce the opening consonants in his first and last names is particularly onerous. I still have the impulse to shelter him,

clearing his path of even the smallest twigs of suffering. I am able to summon more compassion for him than I can scrape together for myself. Even if he can grant me a divorce and half the house, the judge can't do a thing about that.