

Happy Valentine's Day

**Sasha Borianni**  
Alpine, New Jersey

I refuse to apologize. My husband is dead, and not even his daughter could have made me deny his instructions to be cremated. Trent and I made a pact three years ago not to be laid out stiff and cold in a church, waiting for mourners to say, "*Oh, she put him away nicely.*" However, Briana was insistent, and it grew contentious with her lashing out resentments I'd never known she'd had against me. I told myself it was her grief talking; still, I wanted to push her off my condo balcony. Thankfully, her brother TJ intervened, making me realize Trent's children, unlike me, had to identify his body; they needed to see their father one last time.

Bottling up all those emotions, I poured them into the funeral arrangements, answering awkward questions and consoling well-intentioned friends and family who repeatedly expressed how sorry they were. In the last two months, I've come to hate the word *sorry* and whatever meaning it has in a time like this. Yet pieces of my heart crumbled with every kiss on the cheek, money-filled sympathy card, and nauseating smell of food that never stopped coming. A private service would have been easier, but I had to stand before left and right-wing politicians, allies, and enemies from his term as a New Jersey senator and those he led as President of IBEW. Did any of them care how I felt, or had they come to share how they felt? I'm sure that the reality of my husband's death will come crashing down upon me, fracturing every piece of my heart and soul that I've been holding together with Ambien and alcohol.

We'd arrived in Alpine, New Jersey, a few days before Christmas to celebrate the holidays, followed by Briana's nuptials. After leaving her three children behind to live in Los Angeles in search of an acting career, she finally settled down with a woman who was smitten with her. Her father paid for the elaborate wedding attended by 200 guests, not even close family or friends. Trent hoped this would cut the financial cord. TJ was a lot less needy, more of a ladies' man who never imposed his financial burdens on his father and made his money as a self-appointed restaurant broker.

An aviation mechanic discovered my husband in hangar number 8 at Teterboro airport. The coroner said he suffered a massive heart attack. I didn't know how that was possible when he'd recently had a stress test before we'd left home. Isn't that always the case, '*healthy 63-year-old drops dead of a heart attack?*' What I couldn't understand was why he'd been at Teterboro. We were planning to leave Jersey the next day for our vacation, and he'd insisted on making a trip to Target to replace my damaged suitcase.

So it went that after having executed a beautiful wedding, I was forced to plan my husband's funeral and subsequently stay in Alpine until his Will was read and parts of his estate dispersed. Briana wants more, even with the property and substantial insurance money she received; she wants what's mine. Another reason why this driver can't get me to JFK airport fast enough is that I'm struggling with a Target Tote, cradling a wooden box filled with my husband's cremains.

**Isabella Washington-Moore**  
Esterillos Puternarus, Costa Rica

The closer I get to my home, the more I realize nobody can live in paradise forever. I dread returning not only to the cold temperatures of Philadelphia but also to an employer I desire yet despise. For that reason, I've gone to the dark side, compiling information into what I've named Operation Unicorn; it's a slow process, one that will put her in a jail cell. Until then, there's a party to get ready for; the Twins have probably already arrived to put the final touches on the decorations and finish preparing the evening's bountiful feast.

Valentine's Day has been special to me ever since I was a little girl when my Daddy would bring home candy-filled hearts for my mother and me. I know it's a commercial holiday, but I like that it's one day dedicated to love worldwide. For that reason, I always ensured that any man I was dating knew I had expectations on February 14. It didn't have to be an expensive gift, but it had to be a romantic gesture. This evening's Valentine's sendoff might not include a gift from a lover; I will share the same in the love and community of my Esterillos family.

I've owned my home on this tranquil side of the island for 10 years; these past six months have been my longest stay to date. Blessed with dual citizenship, I can travel from the United States to Costa Rica without restrictions. When my business in the U.S. is complete, I plan to make this my permanent home and set up a boutique accounting firm, offering my intuitive skills to the locals.

Except for family, I entertain few visitors. My most recent guests departed the island this morning. White Magic, Tampa Bay's franchise quarterback, missed his third chance at a Super Bowl ring due to a hit from Eagles defensive tackle Fletcher Cox breaking his clavicle. The other not-so-ideal visitor, Lady Zoë.

With my belly full of my morning Casado from Guava Café and my legs weak from my visitors, I build up a sweat steering my bike up the road, greeting "Pura Vida" to everyone who passes me by. I will miss this community of friends who now call themselves my family. That's why I'll hand out the gifts for this Valentine's Day.

Turning into the bottom of the driveway, I pull my bike to a stop to check the mailbox painted to replicate my house. As usual, it's empty, and then I take the time to smell the flowers that outline its perimeter. Picking an equal number of colorful Guairá morada, speckled plantillas, and red ginger flowers, I place them into the bicycle's basket, allowing their fragrance to carry me the rest of the way. That is until I'm damn near thrown off my bike when a Mercedes Town Car whizzes past me. Seeing luxury cars in Esterillos is odd; maybe someone has decided to surprise me.

Esterillos, Costa Rica  
**Malcolm Moore**  
Formerly known as Elijah Moore

Cruising along the Pacific coastline, I realize, as I have many times before, that choosing to live my life as someone else was the worst choice I ever made. The Federal Marshalls tucked me away in Witness Protection; after all the back and forth to court and those I'd testified against were behind bars, outside of their monthly check-in calls, they didn't give a damn what happened

to me. My handlers think I should be grateful to have a new life with a \$60K salary while employed as a Home Depot data analyst. But then again, they have ideas about this new life that I can't agree with because I don't believe my old life is over.

Except for the funds I stashed before becoming a nobody, the only thing I do outside the view of the Feds is run a tax preparation business, which allows me to build a cash reserve with no taxes to report. There is satisfaction from cheating the government, especially when I see the joy on my client's faces when I get them a return they certainly wouldn't have gotten from H&R Block. I hated to leave in the middle of tax season, however, I promised my clients their taxes would be completed when I returned.

My income is minuscule compared to being stripped of everything and everyone I loved. First, my wife, Isabella, refused to go into the program with me. Then, my lifelong friend, Sémile, whom I considered my brother, left to believe I was merely a snitch. The worst blow was losing my mother, who died a few months after the program relocated us to Colorado Springs. I was unable to invite family to her funeral or even let them know she'd died, that is, until I reached out to Sémile, who showed up, and together, we decided to have her cremated so that one day I could spread her ashes back in Philly. His showing up in Colorado allowed me to explain my reason for becoming a government witness against the Russian arms dealers with whom I'd become entangled. Unfortunately, it left my wife holding the bag.

My transformation from Elijah Moore to Malcolm Moore came with much growth and acceptance. To keep from losing my mind, I started walking every morning, eventually leading to full-on hiking through the mountains with fellow hikers. When I started seeing results, I got serious, joined one of the outdoor gyms, and hired a personal trainer, causing me to shed over 70 pounds. That, I'm sure, will be surprising to my wife, who's the only woman I ever really thought about after leaving Philadelphia. There were other women, even one who seemed to be a good match, but the jealousy over what she didn't understand was too much. I'm sure part of that fault is on me, so there's no way I'm settling down with anyone until I can look Isabella in the eyes and know it's over.

For many reasons, showing up to my wife's Costa Rican hideaway is risky, but what do I have to lose? Is anyone still looking for me? The only person who knows I've come to win back my wife is Sémile, who also thinks he's discovered the person behind my fall from grace.

This island's warmth completely contrasts the insulation I've been dwelling in for almost two years. In a few hours, I've gone from seeing the mountains' white caps to the ocean's white caps. Had I chosen somewhere like this, my mother would have had a reason to live.

Pulling into her carport, I see why she's chosen to live on such a beautiful island, though I still don't understand why she never told me about this place. Stepping out of the car and taking in her view, pondering life with a woman who's the entire package any man would desire: intelligent, sexy, and submissive when she wants to be, deserving of much more than I was offering. This time, I'll listen, understand her needs, and not assume I know what's best for us.

Not to be presumptuous, I leave my bag in the car along with her Valentine's Day gift. I announce myself using the knocker on her wide front door and peek inside the glass panels. When there's no answer, I turn the knob to find it unlocked. Stepping inside, the aroma of spices permeates the air, filling whatever she's cooking and me with a hunger for her. The vibrantly painted, from the Spanish floor tiles in the foyer to an enormous sofa that could serve as a bed tossed with giant pillows, show me another side of Izzy. To the right of me, lined up against the wall are about 50 red gift bags stuffed with white tissue paper. Is she having a party?

Walking across the room, the first thing that gives me hope is a framed picture from our wedding day on a crowded bookshelf. Through the patio doors are tall potted plants, whose leaves sway on the veranda, centered around an in-ground swimming pool. This reflection of Izzy's life tells me coming here to reclaim my wife was the right choice.

**Bryce A. Goodman**  
Esterillos, Costa Rica

I'm not a man with a list of regrets, but if I had one, it would be having allowed Isabella to slip from my grasp, which is why I find myself in a country that's so fucken hot I should've

known to change my clothes on the jet. The detective I'd paid for guaranteed she'd be here, hosting a party, then leaving to return to Philadelphia in the morning, so my timing is perfect.

On the drive to her house, rather than look at the landscape, I immerse myself in work, responding to emails and text messages and returning client calls. This shit never ends. As the driver climbs the hill to her driveway, I see why this place was a respite for her. Where I expected her to be living in a bungalow, she's living in a house that, depending on the lot size behind it, must be worth close to a million, even in these parts. Once again, my expectations of Isabella have been exceeded.

Where I failed was when Isabella needed me to be emotionally available; I came up short. My focus had been to satisfy her like I'd satisfied all the women in my life. She needed me to be vulnerable, and I couldn't give that. In retrospect, I could've been gentler and patient and made love to her. However, that's what I didn't want to do: make love, fall in love, or be tied down; nevertheless, I should've because she was the only woman I trusted.

I reasoned I'd be her savior once her ex-husband was gone, but I was wrong. Rather than answer my calls, she left the city. I tracked her down, first to Houston to visit her mother and then to Costa Rica. If what she's running from is to get out of this business, I'm the only one who can make that happen. The problem will be getting her to trust me.

I'm man enough now to admit my insane desire to hit my financial goals outweighed any chance I had at love, yet this last year without her, I plan to try it. Hence, I'm here on Valentine's Day with a gift that will undoubtedly show my commitment and bring her home, even if it reveals my dark side.