

FOREVER SHIRLEY

By Stephen Sinisi

Shirley was acting strange all day. Distant. Detached. Unmoved by soft kisses on the shoulder.

"Did I do something wrong?" John asked.

No response. John replayed the day's events in his mind, hoping to uncover a comment that might have set her off. Nothing stood out. In fact, he hadn't said more than ten words to her all day. Was that the problem? Was he not trying hard enough to make conversation? He wasn't trying to ignore her. He was just trying to give her some space. There's nothing more annoying than a person who asks you if something's wrong once a minute. Once an hour. That's the right amount of time.

"You sure?" John asked.

He stared at her. She stared straight ahead. Cigarette in one hand. TV remote in the other. She liked to smoke in bed. He liked it when she smoked in bed. He thought she looked sexy. The way she slowly drew back the smoke and blew it softly in his face. It took his breath away, that and asthma.

She leaned over towards the side table and dabbed her cigarette in the ashtray. As she did that the bed sheet dropped a few inches, exposing the side of her breast. John pulled the sheet down

further. She whacked his hand with the remote. Life is good, he thought to himself. He watched her, from a respectable distance of fourteen inches, as she poured herself another shot of Kraken and slammed it back. Dark hair. Full lips. Baby blue eyes. Ample bosom. Tattoo of an eighteenth-century rendition of Satan riding an alpaca on the small of her back. He sighed. She burped.

There's no such thing as a perfect relationship, he thought, but this comes pretty close. Here, on a twenty-six-year-old mattress with dark green stains at the corners, he was close to achieving inner peace. He was sure of it. Wikipedia told him so. Sure, they had had their troubles in the past. What couple doesn't? People make mistakes. Some people have affairs. Not him, though. He never had an affair. Not to say he wouldn't do it, or that he's better or morally superior to people who have had one. He'd consider having an affair. Actually no, no he wouldn't. Under very specific circumstances, maybe. At the right time. With the right woman. With the right condom. Even then, he probably wouldn't do it. Why risk ruining a great thing? They were perfect for each other. It's not often that a Taurus and a Gemini born in the year of the dog meet and fall in love on a full moon while Mars is passing through Aries. They had something special. They had a threesome in New Mexico with a graphic designer named Thiago.

Shirley took a long drag from her cigarette. A clump of ashes fell on the sheets. She brushed it off towards his side of the bed. John picked up one of her old acoustic guitars. It had three strings and was covered with stickers of bands that had a profound influence on her musical tastes: Black Sabbath, Led Zeppelin, Nirvana, Bruce Springsteen, One Direction. He plucked the first

four notes of Iron Man, the only song he knew how to play on guitar (he also knew how to play I Believe I Can Fly by R. Kelly, but only on the recorder).

Da...Da...Da Da...

She whacked his hand with the remote again. He put the guitar back on the stand. He stared at it for a bit, cursing the fact that he sucked at music. He tried to write her a song for Valentine's Day once.

"It sounds like Iron Man," she said.

"No it doesn't," he said.

She stopped him before he could make it to the chorus. He tried to write her another song. It sounded like Iron Man played backwards. She has since removed Iron Man from her Pilates Core Crush workout playlist on Spotify. He has since stopped writing songs.

It's hard to impress someone like Shirley. She's an artist. She paints in a loft. She's had her paintings featured in a gallery. Sure, the guy who owns the gallery is a friend of hers and they may or may not have had sex with each other in the distant past but still, a gallery is a gallery. A nice respectable gallery, too. With white walls. The people that saw her paintings in the gallery loved them. They talked about buying them. They're still talking about buying them. "Someone will buy them," Shirley said as her right eyelid twitched. She was right. Someone did. A banker.

Some guy named Ted. He bought a portrait that Shirley painted of a stray cat named Falafel. The cat is dead now, but the painting is still very much alive in Ted's condo. It's hanging beside three samurai swords and a giant poster of Che Guevara's face. He invited John and Shirley over for dinner one night to see it. When Shirley excused herself to go to the bathroom, Ted pulled out his phone and started showing John pictures of all the girls he's slept with. He flipped through the first fifty real slow, then quickly blew past the last twenty-five when he heard the toilet flush. John thought he saw a girl in there that looked like Shirley. It wasn't her, though. She was wearing red panties. Shirley doesn't wear panties.

Her phone buzzed. John leaned over to see who it was. She whacked his hand with the remote again.

"Who is it?" he said.

"Maurice," she said.

"The yoga instructor?"

"The director."

Shirley met him at a three-day film course. He wore the skinniest jeans that John had ever seen. He was making a science-fiction film about hookers in space. He thought Shirley would be perfect for it. He wrote the part of Hooker #3 just for her. John was skeptical. He didn't think it

was the kind of role his girlfriend should take. She was better than that. He had a chat with her about it and she agreed, Hooker #2 was a much better character.

Shirley picked up the phone. "Hey baby!" she squealed as she jumped out of bed. She knocked over the bottle of Kraken in the process. It shattered as soon as it hit the floor. She didn't seem to notice. She skipped towards the washroom. He watched her naked butt cheeks jiggle along the way.

"Say hi for me," John said.

She slammed the door shut. Silence, except for a few muffled giggles.

John watched the liquid from the bottle slowly drain into the cracks in the hardwood floor. "It's a sign," he said to himself quietly. Everything became perfectly clear to him. The bottle. The liquid. It was a metaphor for his relationship. It represented something profound. A change. Shirley represented the bottle. Hard and cold, yet fragile and transparent. And of course the liquid inside represented her emotions. He could see them in there, floating around, but they were stuck inside. The cap was screwed on tight (the bottle didn't actually have a cap, but that's besides the point), and the emotions couldn't get out. John represented the floor: solid, stable, supportive, slightly pock-marked. They were two opposite forces, brought together by the pull of gravity (i.e., love/unrestrained sexual desire). Her dropping the bottle represented a subconscious leap of faith. A leap from her pedestal, straight into his arms. He had succeeded. He had cracked through her exterior and released her emotions. She was his and he was hers. He could look

across the room and see a direct path that led through the next twenty years of his life: a quaint, Victorian-style house in Caldedon, three kids (two girls and a boy), weekends in the city with two strollers in tow and weeknights sipping caramel macchiatos on the front porch under a pastel-coloured sky. Little Emma with her yellow sundress and crayons (a spitting image of her mom, sans the nose ring and the black lipstick) scribbling a picture of her daddy on the wainscoting in the living room. He'd look at Shirley. She'd smile. He'd smile. They'd scold her mildly. They'd make love in the attic. Peace. Quiet. Financial stability. This is what she wanted. This is what she was trying to tell him. He understood perfectly.

He leaned over the bed and picked up the shards of glass on the floor. He held them close to his chest and squeezed until his hand started to bleed. He heard her giggle again from behind the door. It made him smile.