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# I'm Sorry You Feel That Way

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The Astonishing but True Story of a  
Daughter, Sister, Slut, Wife, Mother,  
and Friend to Man and Dog

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## Love in the Age of Ick

I once had a boyfriend who referred to me as his old lady. It was his adamant belief that while I already had a really sweet rack, gaining twenty-five pounds would make it even better. We were eating lunch at Taco Bell on the day he proposed: he had the kid behind the counter slip the ring into my bean burrito. I said yes. I'd known this guy for only eleven weeks, but already I was thinking about our future together: I was thinking about the best way to arrange furniture in a double-wide to maximize space, I was curious about what it would take to build a redwood deck, I was wondering if you could wallpaper over panel. "Anything you want, Momma," my fiancé said—he called me "Momma" and some times "Little Momma"—"You're the boss."

His name was Vincent Petrone. I met him at a smorgasbord called The Iron Ladle, where I spent the summer of 1989 bussing tables. He brought his grandma in for lunch one Sunday in June after Mass. She was a sweet-seeming lady with hair the color of old

brick, bright pink lipstick, and powdery white skin. She was wearing a sweatshirt she'd fancied up herself—all it took was a BeDazzler, some black and gold metallic beads, and an iron-on transfer of a leopard. When I cleared away the first stack of dirty dishes from their booth, she said thank you, baby. When I cleared away the second, Vincent Petrone cleared his throat and said he could die happy now that he'd seen what heaven looks like. His grandma beamed at him, then asked didn't I think her grandson was a good-looking boy?

I said yes. I thought she was the cutest old lady I'd ever seen in her sparkly leopard sweatshirt, and I didn't want to hurt her feelings. But I was not telling the truth. Her grandson was not good-looking. His face was scarred. He wore black-rimmed glasses. He had a little moustache. There was an inky tattoo of a Maltese cross on his forearm, a naked mermaid on his biceps. He was wearing a yellow bowling shirt that had the word *Poacher* embroidered in red letters on the pocket. Under it, he wore a T-shirt that said *Twenty Ways to Say I Love You*. It showed stick figures engaged in twenty different sex acts. Those shirts heightened his ick factor, and I didn't yet know that he was twenty-nine years old, or that he was unemployed, or that he wore those shirts every day.

But something about him must have appealed to me because when he asked for my phone number, I gave it to him. I was refilling his grandma's cup of decaf when Vincent Petrone picked up his spoon, licked it, winked at me. "Momma, if you were my woman," he said, "you'd eat dessert every night."

I didn't yet know about Vincent's plans for fattening me up with the goal of increasing my rack, but from the look of his plate—chocolate soft-serve over chocolate pudding over many pieces of

chocolate cake—Vincent liked dessert. This charmed me. I immediately spun it into gold. I manipulated it into metaphor. This guy, I decided, was a tragic hero, a misunderstood soul, the Bad Boy who longed for something sweet.

I was nineteen years old, just arriving at that place some women go to invent complex inner lives for a certain kind of man, one too emotionally vulnerable to manage this kind of work on his own. I would be a savior, a fixer, a social worker, because Vincent Petrone needed me.

A drunk and a drunk driver, a habitual shoplifter, Vincent was a guy who walked out of restaurants without paying; a guy who'd fill his gas tank, then drive away; a guy who didn't leave a bar, party, or parade without using his fists. I thought any little thing he did that wasn't physically violent or illegal was endearing and cute, evidence of my good influence and a good reason to stay the course, see him through. He could've hot-wired that car, but he didn't! He could've broken that guy's legs, but he didn't! He likes coconut cream pie!

Less than a week after we first met, Vincent Petrone and I decided we were in love, a couple, he would be my old man and I would be his old lady. Though I told Vincent that I loved him—I promised it, I swore it—I can't say I much liked him. But I was nineteen and there were things *about* him that I liked.

I liked the scar on his face. He'd slid across asphalt in a motorcycle accident that left one side of his face normal, regular, a face like everyone else's, and the other side forever bruised-looking. He was self-conscious about his face and would lay his palm across his

cheek while talking to people. Whenever I saw him like that, I felt tenderly toward him.

But when he flipped off a mom at the red light next to us for looking at him funny, or when he flipped over his drink because he didn't like how the guy on the next bar stool over said hello to me—or when he raised a glass over his head then brought it down to shatter on the bar because he felt like no one was paying attention to what he was saying about his grandma's hip surgery when, in fact, he was so drunk and his words were so slurred that no one could understand what he was saying—I felt tired. Weary. Oh, Vincent, I'd say. I'd sigh, and my friends would want to know what are you doing with that loser?

I was enjoying the high drama of female masochism and martyrdom. I liked making excuses for Vincent—He's tired! He has a lot on his mind! He's had a hard life!—and I liked forgiving him. I forgave him for cheating, but accusing me of cheating. For stealing a hundred and fifty bucks out of my purse. For calling me a bitch slut whore, then crying about it, on his knees, his head pressed into my stomach, his arms wrapped around my waist. Oh, Momma, he'd say.

Oh please, my friends would say. How much more of this can you stand?

I liked when Vincent Petrone painted my name in curvy gold letters on the side of his demolition-derby car, a purple Dodge Dart. About thirty seconds into the event, the engine caught fire, but the metaphorical possibilities of that were something I had apparently overlooked.

I liked the white-trashiness of demolition derbies, the beery smells, the bright lipstick on the mouths of ladies in tight tapered jeans and spiky-heeled shoes, the crashing noise of men showing

off for women. I liked thinking of myself as a Bad Boy's Girl: nice sweet shy demure good, the only kind of woman who could tame him, change him, who could make him true, who could, someday, possibly even make him act right.

A year before I met Vincent Petrone, I'd hit the streets, knocking on doors and handing out pamphlets that listed reasons one should vote for then vice president George Bush. I did it because I had a crush on a Young Republican, a clean-shaven boy in khaki pants, navy blue polo shirt, and tasseled loafers. To win his affection, I saved up for a Laura Ashley dress, I pulled my hair back with a headband, I painted my nails a tasteful, ladylike pale pink. I wore panty hose. Heels and perfume. I pledged a sorority my freshman year of college.

But after all my attempts to be who he wanted me to be, the Young Republican still asked some other girl, a girl named Ashleigh who had a whole closet full of Laura Ashley dresses, to his fraternity formal. I didn't believe for a minute that he loved her. I thought he had taken up with Ashleigh only to please his father. I'd never met the man, but I imagined him as a cardigan-wearing, pipe-smoking, emotionally distant CEO hellbent on marrying his son to the daughter of a likewise powerful man as a way to increase his fortune, like the wealthy patriarchs I'd seen on *The Young and the Restless* and *Guiding Light*.

Now that I was Vincent Petrone's old lady, I could throw away my headbands and perm my hair. I could make it even bigger by blow-drying it upside down, teasing it out and up, and spraying it stiff with Aqua Net. I could peg my jeans. I could wear blue eyeliner. After work, I sat in Vincent's apartment getting high. Marijuana gave me a bad case of the munchies, and I had trouble

resisting the Double Stuf Oreos Vincent pushed on me. Double Stuf means Double D, he'd sing. We listened to Bon Jovi or Guns N' Roses or Warrant or Poison or Mötley Crüe or Def Leppard while I dunked Oreos into skim milk. I attempted to give myself blond highlights with hydrogen peroxide but ended up with orange streaks. I wrote long earnest soulful entries in my journal about all the phony people in the world, about how being Vincent Petrone's woman meant I was more real, more authentic than a girl named Ashleigh could ever hope to be.

I also liked that a girl like Ashleigh—a girl who wore floral-print dresses and bows in her hair, a girl who probably had 1,000-thread count sheets and knew when and how to curtsy—would not, could not, did not, have what it takes to handle a guy like Vincent Petrone, one a little mean and a little violent, a little controlling and a little crazy.

But I could. I did. It was a choice I had made.

Vincent Petrone was not a Republican. Or a Democrat. He didn't vote. He dropped out of high school, earned a GED, he didn't go to college. He told me that when he was little, he'd wanted to be an astronaut, but he otherwise didn't talk about his dreams. He'd been in jail in Florida, but was vague about why. He didn't talk about his mother except to say she moved to Florida when he was eight. He was clear about his feelings for his father—he hated the man—but wouldn't elaborate on why. He was unwilling to talk about so many things that I could only imagine the worst: a childhood of thrift-store back-to-school clothes and forgotten birthdays; of free school lunches and no-name tennis shoes; of

no money to correct bad teeth, no money for trombone lessons or ski trips, of nothing but socks and underwear under the Christmas tree. I made Vincent Petrone into the poster boy for "Troubled Past" or "Sad Childhood" or "Dysfunctional Family." I tried to make it up to him. I bought him packs of Marlboros. I felt sorry for him, and I called it love.

There were things Vincent Petrone loved: his grandma who raised him and Neil Young, puppies and babies, the way air smells before a storm, and yellow kitchens—Vincent thought all kitchens should be yellow, like his grandma's. Every morning he drove his grandma to Mass, waiting for her in the car while he nipped bourbon or smoked a joint to calm his shakes while drumming his fingers against the steering wheel to *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*. In the afternoon, he ate whatever she fixed him for lunch, then worked on his demolition-derby car, my name glinting gold in the sun.

He spent his evenings keeping tabs on me. By July, he'd become more insistent about wanting to know where I was, who I was with, and where I was going. He appreciated how I looked in short skirts, tight shirts, and blue eyeliner, but any male attention that came my way because of it peeved him. It made him mad if I joked around with male coworkers or chatted with male customers at The Iron Ladle. The night manager there didn't like the way Vincent loomed around the smorgasbord in a menacing way, watching me work, staring down anyone who met his eye. He'd say what are you looking at? He'd say take a picture, it lasts longer. He'd say you got something you wanna say to me? When the night manager told him he couldn't hang out there anymore, he keyed her car. The next day she told me she didn't need me anymore, she'd taken my name off the schedule.

Take care, she said, and good luck.

Later that night, back at his apartment, Vincent Petrone poured a fifth of whiskey and five cans of Miller Genuine Draft down the drain. He said he was drying out. He said he was doing it just for me. I'd better know the sacrifice he was making, he said, and I assured him I knew, I did.

Three days later we went to a Legends of Rock concert outside Cleveland where Vincent Petrone got snookered. He took off his *Twenty Ways to Say I Love You* T-shirt and waved it like a flag over his head. He snorted some cocaine, he smoked some dope, he swilled some bourbon. He swayed as Blue Öyster Cult played "Burnin' for You," and he pumped his fist and shouted yeah yeah yeah as Molly Hatchet played "Flirtin' with Disaster." He introduced me to a girl named Sheila and said we were going to have a threesome in the car, he introduced me to a girl named Janice and said we were going to have a foursome in the parking lot, he introduced me to a leather-clad biker chick named Willa and said he and she had fucked behind the porta-potties. Oh, Vincent! I said each time. Oh, Vincent!

On the way home, he wove all over the highway, onto the shoulder, then across the white lines, and I don't suppose his ability to concentrate on keeping the car on the road was helped by my shrieking. Vincent! Oh, Vincent! I had it in my head that I could do a better job keeping us on the road, a better job keeping us out of jail should a cop pull us over. To demonstrate my steady hand and excellent judgment, I tried to squeeze myself between Vincent and the steering wheel. I tried to grab control of the steering wheel, but he tried to jerk it away from me. We swerved in front of a semi that honked its horn and flashed its lights at a rhythm that



matched my pounding heart. That did not help me stop shrieking, I could not seem to stop.

Then he raised his hand to me, and that's when all the things I liked about him turned into all the things I hated about myself. As soon as he raised his hand to me, I knew exactly how much I could stand.

I bit Vincent Petrone.

I bit him on the arm, like I was a dog or a toddler or a near-sighted vampire. I broke skin, I drew blood, I left marks. It caught us both off guard. I stopped shrieking. Vincent pulled over to the side of the highway. It was the middle of the night, a beautiful warm starry night in late August. We were somewhere in Ohio. He said get out; I got out.

A few days later, Vincent's grandma came to see me. She brought me a present, a shoe box containing many pairs of long dangly earrings, earrings like chandeliers, like jellyfish and fishing lures. She said she'd been buying them up with the intention of giving them to me for Christmas. She said her grandson was quite a handful and always had been. She wanted me to understand that Vincent had a hard life, a sad life, full of disappointment and sorrow. It's why he acted up sometimes. She said she hoped I could help him. We'll do it together, she said, you and me, we'll help him straighten out. She wanted me to call Vincent, to tell him I was sorry. I think the two of you are so good for each other, she said. Promise me you'll call him.

I promised I would.

I was lying.

I never saw Vincent Petrone again, I never spoke to him, I never heard from him.

Instead, he became a story I'd tell over strawberry margaritas, the same story any number of women can tell, the one that's sometimes called *What Was I Thinking?* or *Back When I Was in My Ick Phase*. I found he was a lot more fun to talk about than he'd ever been to live with; I discovered a lot of women had Vincents of their own.

But every once in a while, without my permission and against my will, this man shows up in my dreams, wearing his Poocher shirt, driving his purple demolition-derby car, my name glinting gold in the sun. He says he has something to say to me. He wants to know who do I think I am. He wants to know did I really love him or did I just hate myself. He wants to remind me of the girl I used to be.