

THE ART OF MEN

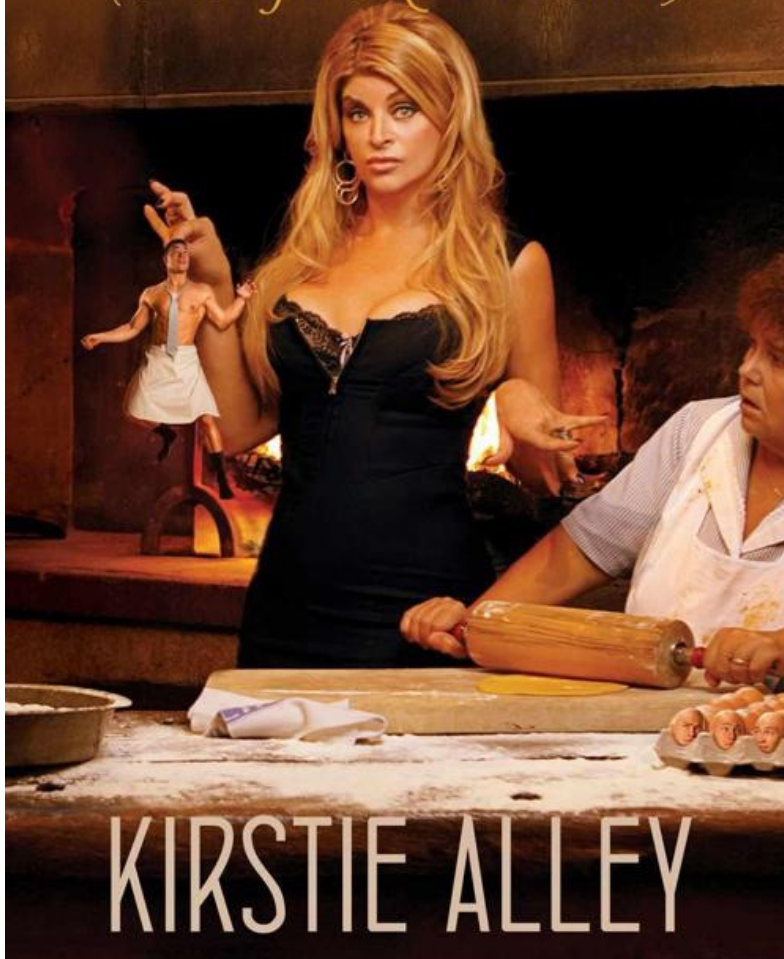
(I Prefer Mine al Dente)



KIRSTIE ALLEY

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ART OF MEN

(I Prefer Mine al Dente)

KIRSTIE ALLEY

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This book is dedicated to my father, who spoiled me for all other men, thereby wrecking my life. I
love you . . .

Introduction

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, Golda Meir, Mother Teresa, Rosa Parks, Harriet Tubman, Helen Keller, Catherine the Great, the Virgin Mary: all of these women were powerhouses worthy of respect and admiration. Yet none of them influenced my life to any great degree. Let's take it down a notch: my mother, my sister, my female neighbors, cousins, schoolteachers, piano instructors, directors, producers, and acrobat coaches didn't influence my life in a major way.

My grandmother influenced my cooking, and the girl across the street from us wore cool, almost white lipstick that I've copied over the years, but other than that, almost 99 percent of my life's influences have come from Men.

Not necessarily good influences, but influences nonetheless.

This is odd because I get along swimmingly with women. I'm probably considered a "woman woman." The majority of my best friends are chicks. Women rarely cause conflicts in my life, probably because I don't have sex with them. If I were a lesbian this book might have been titled *The Art of Women* or *The Art of Vaginas*.

Women have rarely caused me heartbreak and have taken a backseat in my career. From a young age I was surrounded by women who were, well, bitches. My mother was mean, my sister hated my guts, and my piano teacher thought I was a boy.

At around age three, I just sort of wrote women off as troublemakers.

There was one exception: my aunt Mary, with her jet-black hair, smoldering blue eyes, and lips like Elvis. I copied everything she did, from her red nail polish to her genuflecting and black mantilla. (She was Catholic, so I became Catholic.) She had a pet raccoon, so I later raised six. She wore White Shoulders; so do I on occasion. She smoked cigarettes and left her lipstick imprint on each. I smoked too, and made sure everyone could differentiate my cigarettes from the rest in the ashtray by the lipstick stain.

I adored Mary; she was extraordinary in every way. She had a tarantula in her swimming pool one summer. She was like Jane Russell, buxom, sexy, and all woman. She was the perfect role model.

She died of lung cancer when I was 13. She was the last woman who had any magnitude of influence over me.

This book is about the Men in my life and how they have influenced it. Men, Men, glorious Men! I actually get silly and dizzy just saying the word "Men." I hate and adore them. I need yet reject them. I was born boy crazy, and it turned to man crazy by the time I was 15. Men are these curious creatures who total a little over half of the earth's population. They are troublesome, complex, brutal, and gentle. My life would have been unlivable and drab without them, unbearable really. Men are not at all like women, and women who treat Men like they are women are doomed. Even supergay men cannot be treated like women; after all, they are Men, just Men who love Men.

I've come to realize that Men are actually an art form. There is definitely an art to Men: the loving of them, pleasing them, sexing them up, cheering them on, controlling them, making them feel important, giving them the right amount of attention without smothering them, taking care of them when they are sick, blowing smoke up their asses when they feel weak or vulnerable, and blowing

them when you don't want to without them knowing you don't want to. These are just some of the tasks women must be able to perform in order to handle the Men in their lives artfully—skillfully—gracefully, but mostly covertly.

The stories in this book belong to me. They are mine. They denote how Men have influenced my life, not the other way around. They reflect my experiences of love, loss, evil, joy, revenge, and triumph. One interesting phenomenon was revealed as I began writing about the Men in my life: they are not just happenstances any more than the brushstrokes of Manet or John Singer Sargent are accidental. They are works of Art. Men are malleable. They aren't dissimilar to paintings. They can be colorful or dull, overworked or minimal, interesting or boring, lively or dead. They can emote light and happiness or darkness and loathing. Some you want to keep in the family, some you want to put on the auction block. People may be in awe of your painting. Others just can't see what you see in it. They come in all ages and sizes, some are erotic, some are classic, a few are magnificent, but many are landscapes.

Whatever form Men have taken in my life, they have culminated in a giant collage in my soul. They are my treasures, my heartaches, and my gifts. They are my Artwork. After 60 years of life, I continue to strive to perfect The Art of Men . . .

The Art of “Retarded” Young Men

MIDWAY THROUGH filming *Look Who's Talking Too* with John Travolta, we were night shooting in an airport in Vancouver; it was about 2:00 a.m., and it was freezing. I couldn't wait to wrap and go back to my cozy hotel room. Turns out I was one month pregnant, and it was really hard to stay awake. I recall being so tired that if I'd fallen into the gutter and a Nazi put a Luger to my head and threatened to blow my brains out if I didn't rise—I would have told him to pull the trigger.

Just as we were filming the last shot of the evening, an airline captain approached me. He informed me that his 20-year-old “retarded” son had recently been in a horrible car accident that had almost taken his life. He had been badly burned and had broken both legs and an arm. He told me his son was my number one fan and that he'd brought him to the set to meet me. He inquired as to whether it was possible, right after we finished shooting, that I could come into the hangar and take just a minute to meet him. Suddenly me being pregnant and freezing my ass off didn't have much relevance. The retarded (it wasn't politically incorrect to say that word back then), badly burned, and broken lad had traveled all this way just to meet me. Of course I said yes!

When we completed the final shot of the night, the director yelled, “Cut, print, wrap.” John escorted me to the hangar, and I set eyes on the poor, retarded, bandaged young man sitting in a wheelchair. I took a deep breath because he was covered in gauze and splints and was more damaged than I had imagined. When I approached him he began to laugh and gyrate in his wheelchair back and forth. He was ecstatic to meet me. These are the times being a celebrity really pays off—to bring that much joy to an individual is . . . joyous.

He put his bandaged hand out—I took it. He said in his retarded way, “I love you.” I reciprocated, “I love you, too.” He pulled me closer. He was really strong! “I love you,” a little louder and more audible. “I love you, too,” I said. He then took both my arms and pulled me much closer. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” he said, and I proclaimed, “I looove you soooo much” in the sort of half-realized, half-anxiety-ridden way you'd act if a retarded boy was mauling you. He was holding me so tightly that I was actually hurting me, but he was retarded, so I persevered.

The next thing I remember is that he put both arms fully around me and was squeezing me so intensely that I feared I would stop breathing. Suddenly he flipped out of his wheelchair, pushing me down on the ground, and was lying on top of me. I began to get nervous—I was pregnant—and he had just been in a hideous accident with broken bones and third-degree burns. As he was face-to-face atop me he began chanting, “I love you, I love you, I love you,” and started slightly humping my legs. My fear turned to nervous, hysterical laughter, and then I noticed this odd thing happening around me. The crew members were watching us—so was John—and so was the retarded kid's dad. I began reaching out to them, mildly pleading for help, nervously saying “OKAY, OKAY, I love you, too, but I don't want you to get hurt. Hey, you guys,” I said, reaching for the director and cinematographer, “need a little help here.”

But no one would help me. No one would reach back for me. I felt like I was in a bad episode of *TV*

Twilight Zone. John just kept smiling this bizarre smile; he looked like Chucky. Why wasn't anybody helping us?? Why wasn't anyone worried that either I would miscarry or the retarded boy would have to be taken to the emergency room . . . again??!! I really started to flip my shit, and I began tearing up. My eyes were welling and my mind was racing as I tried to pry the broken, retarded, burned, humping young man off me. My panic increased, "You guys! He's going to get hurt! John! I'm pregnant! Help us! Somebody PLEASE help us!!!" Like a bad dream of being stuck in the middle of a satanic cover-up, the ring of camera crew, directors, John, the retarded boy's father, and everyone else began laughing like jackals. I almost fainted.

Then . . .

The retarded boy leaped up and started ripping his bandages from his face! Was it a miracle?! Had this "retarded" young man's love for me healed him???

No! It was Woody Harrelson. Fucking Woody Harrelson!

I hadn't had a single clue. It was the perfect caper. He wasn't even filming in Vancouver!! No, he had traveled all the way from LA, JUST to trick me. The entire cast and crew were in on the prank.

To this day Woody and I remain excellent friends—I would do anything for Woody—and he would do anything for me . . . or to me.

—DOROTHY L. SAYERS

The Art of Hopelessly Honest Fathers

THE ONLY simple man I've met is my father—one of the last men standing who believes honesty, virtue, monogamy, and integrity prevail.

My father slept with one woman exclusively until he was 60 years old, until the day she died. He gives the word “monogamy” its original meaning. For him, marriage is black and white—there is no gray. You are in or out—you are faithful or you are gone.

I have tried to live up to his example, as I think my dad's philosophy is sane and helps a marriage survive. Let's face it, much of the crazy shit throughout history has been due to the complications between men and women. Relationships can create unfathomable joy or insurmountable pain, confusion, and suffering. Wars have been waged because of love. My father was my role model in regard to marriage; he made it look effortless. I attempted to follow in his footsteps, but in hindsight it seems I didn't get the entire memo.

While I was married to Parker, I was filming the miniseries *North and South*. I'd fallen madly in love with a fellow costar. I was married. He was married. I'd thoroughly justified this love affair by asserting, “We haven't had sex—we haven't done *anything* sexual. I just LOVE him; he's my soul mate.” And it WAS true. We never did have sex . . . of any kind.

Girls *always* tell their friends about their love affairs. Perhaps men keep it on the down low; women never do. I had complete agreement from my friends that this love affair was correct. It was romantic. It was destiny. We were soul mates. “Soul mates”: the term I've come to discover means *I need a reason to cheat on someone or get out of my current relationship, so I'm gonna go find a “soul mate” to keep this from seeming so sleazy*. At least six soul mates have drifted into my path over my lifetime, so that sort of shoots holes in the “ONE soul mate” theory.

So my girlfriends, the other actresses on *North and South*, had it all worked out that I should ditch my husband, my soul mate should ditch his wife, and we should run off into the wild blue yonder and set up house. Our conspiring was endless. Basically, my soul mate and I agreed this was an excellent plan that we would execute the moment shooting came to an end. It was sorta like running off to join the circus, only dumber.

My father came to visit me toward the end of filming. We were standing on a baseball field when I made the decision to pour my heart out to him regarding my soul mate. No doubt he would understand; no question that he would give us his blessing. I was Daddy's Little Girl, and he would never deny me the love of my life! I put on my best lovesick-actress face and began my Academy Award-caliber spiel . . .

“Daddy, although it isn't right,” I began with uncanny eloquence, “I've fallen deeply in love with someone, and we all know that people can't help who they fall in love with or where and when it happens. You just have to grab on to it, embrace it, and run with it, and although people will be hurt it's really in the best interest of all of us that we end up with who we should be with because that's the

way the stars align and that's how destiny is supposed to work, Daddy. In fact, Daddy, you're NEVER gonna believe who it is, I mean you met him at dinner last night, and I know it's just crazy and you must think I've gone mad or something, hahahaha, and are wondering if I need to be hauled off to the nuthouse, but I can assure you this is all well thought out, and my decision is already made and in fact SEE, there he is right out there on third base." I pointed to my devastatingly handsome love-god, who gave us a big wave while flashing his gorgeous knock-me-dead smile. "Destiny has taken an unpredictable turn, Daddy, and although we 'haven't done *anything*'"—I wanted to make sure he remembered that even if I was married, I was still his little girl and pure as the driven snow—"although we haven't done *anything*," I continued, "I love him madly and I just can't imagine my life without him. He's my soul mate, Daddy, he's my future."

Daddy looked at me with those pale blue eyes that are reminiscent of old movie stars like Ronald Reagan and Robert Mitchum. He smiled and leaned in close, took a long pause, and said, "You're married. Knock it off."

This is the man who shaped my life, who told me things like "Telling the truth will make your life easier," and "Killing someone is more acceptable than adultery because killing someone can be a crime of passion, a knee-jerk reaction to something shocking. Adultery is premeditated, Kirstie. It's planned. It is the thing that will kill relationships and leave one or both forever devastated."

My father is not a lecturer, a pontificator, or a man of many words. But DAMN, when he does open his mouth, he lays out the purest, most simplistic truths ever uttered.

"Knock it off" pierced my love-stricken heart like an X-Acto knife ripping through a cardboard box. Predictably, he dropped those three words: KNOCK IT OFF, and then said, "You know what's right. God, I've hated those words my whole life! "You know what's right." It makes me feel like I have to be responsible for stuff!! It makes me feel like there's no room for FATE or SERENDIPITY.

YES!!!! I KNOW what's right . . . I'm not into RIGHT today, Daddio . . . I'm into LOVE . . . Oh lord why did I tell you in the first place?? You're all, "I'm monogamous. I'm one life, one wife." UGH! WHY did I confide in someone who is so, so, so HONEST?!!

Now, of course I didn't "knock it off" upon demand. I strung the soul-mate adventure out, as usual, to the final millisecond so that I could make damn sure parting would be the kind of sorrow found only in *Casablanca*. I had to ride that sharp edge of destroying my marriage and his. And when my soul mate and I were in our final dramatic throes, we vowed that we would always be soul mates, and although we were "good people" and doing the "right thing here" by parting ways, we would eternally love each other . . . *the most*.

It makes me laugh now; stupidity is like that. Profound lovers' words always seem to echo of idiocy after the tryst is over.

But my father's words did not fall on deaf ears, just stupid, rebellious, unethical ears.

Unfortunately for my poor husband, this was not the last man I would fall madly in love with while I was married; I just had to give one more of them a whirl. That next man went on to become the husband of my now-best friend, Kelly Preston.

The Art of Monkeys

MY GRANDFATHER admired and encouraged my wild ideas. He embraced them and validated their existence. He allowed me to be an artist. He also contributed to my art by joining in and helping me achieve my wacky dreams. He went along with my eccentric idea of owning many monkeys by volunteering to buy my first one when I turned eight.

He helped me put salt on sparrows' tails until I actually caught one. He never smashed my dreams.

He applauded the little beautiful things I created. The bouquets of flowers I picked for him. The May baskets I cut from construction paper and filled with posies and candy. The way I combed his hair for hours sitting on his lap—all forward, swooped to the side, slicked back, swirled around his head, or waxed standing straight up into the air. He complimented each hairstyle.

Out of 26 grandchildren, I was his favorite.

He bought me the most beautiful dolls. My dad had to tell my grandfather, “Dad, she is not your only grandchild. I have two more of 'em at home. You can't buy her all these things and not buy them for the other kids. It makes them jealous.”

My grandfather responded by saying, “By God! It's my money, and by God, I'll buy her whatever the hell I want to.” Perhaps you see where I got my attitude. That was that, and, of course, the following Christmas I got a doll that was three feet tall and wore a bright red dress. The other grandchildren got tops.

Although I only knew him for seven years, he gave me enough inspiration to last a lifetime.

He taught me to turn darkness into light, and later in my life I turned drug money into flowers, remind me of bad being changed to good and to remind me of him.

I now spend the same money that I used to spend weekly on drugs, approximately \$400, to buy flowers for my home or to send to people I love. To this day, every time I see a sparrow I think of my grandfather and me, out in his yard, armed with tiny Morton saltshakers, attempting to put salt on the tails of sparrows, just for the opportunity of holding one in our hands.

When my grandfather left this world, I spoke to him every night. I felt his strong presence in my room for almost a year. When I could no longer perceive him, I tried writing him letters and burning them in the bathroom sink. Somehow I thought the smoke would carry my messages to him wherever he was.

I will never forget my grandfather and the magical way he reinforced who I really am. He helped me realize that dreams *are* reality, not the other way around.

He never had the opportunity to buy me a monkey, as he died when I was seven. I have a fleet of lemurs now, and not a day goes by that they don't remind me of my grandfather, Clifford William Alley. I named my son after him, William True Parker.

People always ask me how I maintain such a beautiful life, and I always answer, “Through my grandfather.”

—DOROTHY PARKER

The Art of Sticks

I TOOK MY first lover when I was five. We had moved from a tiny house on Estelle Street in Wichita, Kansas, to a modest trilevel house on Bellaire Street. Although the “upstairs” of the cedar-and-brick house was only seven steps up, I would gaze for hours out the window as if I were positioned high above the magnolias at Tara. It was from this crow’s nest that I spotted lover number one: Henry, a handsome chap who shared the date of my birth. He wasn’t younger or older; he was a “neutral” age to me. Henry and I began our affair by leaping off the roof of Tara. We held tea towels above our heads, holding the four corners together to fashion parachutes. Although they did little to break our falls, they somehow ensured we broke nothing important.

Henry had green eyes like mine, and had a green tent in his backyard. It was the tent that beckoned us to take shelter during a rainstorm and gave us the refuge we needed to “get busy.” Since we were both inexperienced lovers, we had to get creative with our sex tools . . . I chose a stick.

It was riveting to poke his wiener with my stick, and although I was only five, I was bright enough to know that flesh touching flesh was taboo. But stick-to-flesh? That was acceptable. Repeated stick touching proved effective for his arousal as I noticed he grew from tiny to sorta tiny. In fact, the gesture worked like clockwork: tiny . . . stick touch . . . sorta tiny . . . tiny . . . stick touch . . . sorta tiny.

In and out his wiener would go, and it was then it dawned on me: I was in full control of Henry’s wiener! An enormous sense of well-being surged through my veins like some strange fever. The power of sexual domination flooded over me. Henry was under my stick’s control. I had to refrain from throwing back my tiny head and laughing maniacally. Then he attempted to put a stick in my bottom, but I made it clear from the get-go that I would maintain a stickless bottom . . . I didn’t like it then, and don’t like it now. Sort of a standing policy of mine all these years: no objects allowed in my ass.

When my mother rang the dinner bell, it ended that day’s work. It’s amazing how even children know getting jiggy in a sexual fashion will be frowned upon by adults, but no one ever told me not to stick sticks on dudes’ penises. As I grabbed my shorts and headed out of the tent, I told Henry that he would return the next day. I felt confident knowing I could holler at Henry any day at any time and he would come panting like a lovesick puppy.

Ahhh, this was the moment I realized I could manipulate men . . . with sticks.

Live a good life. If there are gods and they are just, then they will not care how devout you have been but will welcome you based on the virtues you have lived by. If there are gods, but unjust, then you should not want to worship them. If there are no gods, then you will be gone but will have lived a noble life that will live on in the memories of your loved ones.

—MARCUS AURELIUS

The Art of Wielding a Hammer

THERE ARE these men in Kansas. They are quiet, unsung, heroic men. They had a profound influence on me when I was a child and I've carried their influence with me into adulthood. These men are called Mennonites.

I have no idea or profess to know any details of what Mennonites believe in, and I could frankly care less. They dress similar to the Amish people, and travel sometimes in horse-and-buggies. The men seem to have beards and the women wear ankle-length dresses and they sort of stay themselves. What I can say about them is that they are the most uniquely helpful and generous people I have observed.

Growing up in Kansas meant witnessing the aftermath of devastating damage and loss of life caused by tornadoes. When I was around eight, there was a catastrophic tornado in Udall, Kansas. My parents took us kids to see the damage the day after. The town was basically leveled, and people were staggering around in a daze like haunted zombies. The confusion is massive after a tornado hits, people have lost everything. I saw the body of a dead woman wrapped around a claw-foot bathtub in the rubble. There was an eerie silence that prevailed, except for the sound of hammers hitting wood. In the distance were the Mennonites, about eight men total. They had begun rebuilding a barn. Not for themselves, but for a family who had lost theirs in the tornado. The family hadn't called them or hired them or invited them. They just showed up, which is their MO.

The Mennonite men were quietly, professionally raising a barn, right before our eyes. The Mennonite wives were serving food to people, homemade, delicious food consisting of shepherd's pie and cherry pie. They were quiet people. They just went about their job of resurrecting a town one barn by one house by one meal. I asked my dad, "Who are those people?"

He said, "They are Mennonites. When bad things happen they just appear and help people out."

It was my "come to Jesus" moment, without Jesus. I started crying, I couldn't believe there were people like that who appear out of nowhere and just help. They didn't look haunted or frazzled or confused or dazed, like the rest of the people milling around the aftermath. They looked confident. They smiled sweetly and respectfully as they served people meals. They took care of the ones who had lost their homes, their family members, and their livestock.

I made a mental, age-eight note: Mennonites are good people. I like them. I hope if anything ever happens in Wichita, they come to help.

Throughout my adult life doing my own charity work with my own church group, the Scientology Volunteer Ministers, I have encountered the Mennonites. Two days after the devastating Greensburg, Kansas, tornado, which obliterated an entire town, I flew in with my group to offer help. As we provided ice, food, clothing, and basic amenities, I could see the Mennonites with their now heavy equipment off in the distance, clearing mangled trees and the shredded remains of houses and far

buildings. It gave me strength to comfort the people who had lost everything as they formed a line in front of me to tell me their own personal tragedies.

We stayed in Greensburg for a few days, doing whatever was needed. Sometimes I hear people degrade religions or the people in those religions. Okay, who am I fooling, it's rampant. But let me tell you this: if you've spent much time in disaster zones, you know all too well it is the religious groups who swoop in to help. In Greensburg, for example, it was the Baptists preparing and serving most of the food. It was Catholic Services trucking in clothes. You had us, the Scientologists importing literally tons of ice to keep the National Guard and other relief workers from roasting to death. And of course the Mennonites working tirelessly to clear the land to make room for new growth. In Greensburg, as in all disaster zones, the goal is to restore hope and life to those areas. No one cared that the cup of ice I handed them or the new baby clothes we gave them came from Scientologists. They were just grateful to have them. And I never gave a thought to what religious group was feeding us or holding the hand of a mother who had just lost a child, other than *thank god that person showed up to hold her hand*.

The Mennonites lit the fuse for me. They taught me charity, humanity, and contribution. They proved to me that any help is better than none and that religion actually has nothing and everything to do with how you help your fellow man.

The Mennonite men in particular taught me that the quiet rebuilding of a human life can begin with something as simple as a hammer and a nail.

The Art of Heroes

MY BROTHER, Craig, is four years younger than I am, or is it three? I'll opt for three because makes me feel more youthful. Craig was a little guy growing up. He was smallish in stature and was easily intimidated by people, including our mother.

When we grew up in Wichita, we weren't allowed to go to kindergarten until we were five. Some weird equation was in place, like if you were turning five within that year, you could attend, so Craig started kindergarten at age four. My birthday is in January, so I was almost six when I started. I never quite understood the equation, and I still don't. There's a BIG difference between a four-year-old and a six-year-old, especially with boys. I've always felt Craig started school too young, and I think it had a profound effect on his development. You may already be able to see that I feel an overwhelming compulsion to always keep my little brother out of harm's way. Craig wasn't a wallflower or anything, he was just so innocent and naive, so easily frightened, and on occasion he did some strange things to keep people from finding that out.

One Friday night, when I was around 12, I got a phone call while staying overnight at my best friend Becky's house. It was Collette, my sister.

"Kirstie, did you leave the iron on before you left tonight?" she asked.

I panicked. I knew I turned the iron off right before I left for Becky's house . . . didn't I? But . . .

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the house almost burned down . . . we had a big blaze and the fire detectives are here!" she blurted out.

Fire detectives???? What the hell are fire detectives?? My heart was pounding . . . DID I leave the iron on? HAD I been the cause of almost burning down the house?! HAD my sister told the fire detectives that I'd borrowed her pink Lady Van Heusen blouse without asking, ironed it, and then intentionally left the iron on intending to burn down the house so that she would stop screaming at me for borrowing her stuff without asking??

"NO, COLLETTE!! I didn't LEAVE THE IRON ON!!!!!!" When in doubt of your guilt, YELL REALLY LOUD so that everyone will believe in your innocence!

Lucky for me, it turned out that Craig had been terrified to be left alone in the house but didn't want anyone to know, so he contrived a swell plan.

He took Mingo, my mom's Maltese, up to the attic and started a small fire. His reasoning was that he would quickly call a neighbor and tell them he smelled smoke. The neighbor would then rush over to find the source. After they found the "small" smolder in the attic, they would put it out and then say, "Craig, this fire must have been started by some electrical malfunction. You aren't safe here. You'd better come next door and stay with us until your folks get home . . . and Craig, great job spotting the fire, the whole house could have burned down. Your mom and dad will be so proud of you. You're a HERO!"

That's the way Craig saw the scene unfolding. That was his bright idea. He lit the match, but the

was no smoldering. The flames began immediately. He freaked out, grabbed Mingo, and climbed down the ladder of the attic. He bolted next door to the neighbors claiming, "THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE!!!" Of course he pretended he had no idea how it started.

But the fire detectives did. It took them about five minutes after the fire was extinguished to find the exact point of the flash. They knew the fire began with a match, and they knew it was started intentionally. My sister, of course, didn't find it necessary to call me and tell me that I hadn't started the fire, so I spent the night in terror of going to jail for arson. When I found out the arsonist was my little brother, I had mixed emotions ranging from sympathy to fear that he might end up a serial killer. I knew from this point on that I had to do more to protect him . . . especially from himself.

One time my mother was going to spank him, so I came swooping in with a flourish. "NO!!!! Don't spank him! I did it, I DID it!!! Spank ME!! Spank me instead of Craig!"

This made my mother furious, so she spanked us both.

Another time my sister wrapped Craig and his friend Stewart in strips of white sheets, like mummies, and then pushed them down so they couldn't move. I had to intervene and throw a rubber knife at her back and hit her with an empty milk jug until she gave in and untied them.

I not only protected my little brother; I gave him all sorts of opportunities. In fact, I gave him his first business opportunity when he was around six. I charged girls in the neighborhood 15 cents to suck his dick. I positioned him in my upstairs bedroom, brought the johns up to my room, closed the door, and commanded him to drop his pants. He did as I asked, and the girls glanced ever so quickly at his wiener. No touching, just witnessing it, and only for about 15 seconds. They paid the 15 cents, one dime and one nickel. I kept the dime and gave Craig the nickel because it was bigger than the dime and he thought it was worth more . . . because I had told him it was.

Word spread, and we made more in that one day than we would have pulling weeds for a week. We would have continued the enterprise, but I figured it was only a matter of time before our operation got busted, and god knows what the punishment for pimping would have resulted in.

Our mother was a tough cookie. She was verbally crushing and prone to spanking with ruler, yardsticks, flyswatters, and belts. Tragically, my dad owned a lumber company, so we had plenty of Alley Lumber Company yardsticks in the house. She was the queen of the backhand. Her hands were skinny and bony. She was only five foot two but packed a mighty slap in the mouth. My brother was her favorite, which isn't saying much. It paid off later in his life, but she was as demeaning and relentless to him as she had been to my sister and me. My mother was witty, intelligent, and funny, but with no warning or provocation she could flip out and scream so viciously it rendered her prey paralyzed. I could see clearly what she was doing to my brother. She was introverting him, belittling him, making him into a victim. My sister, Collette, was defiant with the "I HATE YOUs!!" she would scream right in my mother's face. My mother would backhand her again, and Collette would get that deranged look in her eyes and yell, "I REALLY HATE YOU!!" WHACK!! Wow!! She would never back down!

I was the second child, usually the peacemaker. My way of keeping the peace was to duck. My lifelong friend Eric and I have a routine we've done since childhood. He plays my mother, and the second his backhanding hand rises above his waist, I duck! Ahhh, we never tire of this ridiculous impersonation of my mother.

Our lives went on like this with our mom. My brother was so cute when he was little that anyone with a heart would have eagerly volunteered to protect him. My dad never knew these things were going on, as my mom didn't let him see that side of her, and we were too afraid to rat her out because of what she might have done when he went to work the next day and we were left alone with her.

Protecting Craig became my self-appointed job. I always had an eye on my brother and would intervene between him and my mom when necessary.

As Craig got older, he began to gain confidence. One night after school when I was 16, my mother and I were having an argument in the kitchen. She was accusing me of being a whore, something she seemed obsessed with. I was indeed not slutty or a whore, and in fact I was a virgin. We were really going at it.

“I KNOW WHAT YOU WERE DOING LAST NIGHT!!!!” she screamed. “You know what we call girls who do what you did?? We call them WHORES!!”

“Mother! I didn’t do anything! I didn’t have sex! I didn’t do ANYTHING!!”

SMACK!!! The back of her veiny hand, the same veiny hand that I now possess, cracked across my face. Sometimes she would smack me, and it would sting, but this time it was hard enough that my head was thrown to the left of my shoulder. I whipped around and began to stare her down or cry out both, when out of nowhere I saw these hands and arms come flying into frame, like a close-up in a movie. Then I saw these hands grab her by her shoulders, lift her from the floor, and slam her into the refrigerator.

“THAT is the LAST time you will EVER hit her!!!! You understand??? THE LAST TIME!”

The hands belonged to my baby brother. My sweet, frightened, gentle brother. My mother’s eyes were wider than a deer’s in headlights. She was silenced. He hadn’t hurt her . . . much.

She never hit me, or any of us, again.

My brother was my hero . . . still is.

The Art of Lost Loves

EARLY IN life I learned what it was to lose a man, and I was blindsided by the way the breakup occurred.

I was 10 years old. This boy, Jim, fell in love with me the minute he laid eyes on me. It was one of those obvious, immediate crushes that you pray for after age 40. He followed me like a puppy from room to room. He would call me nightly and have his mother say that I was *muy linda* (very pretty).

He wasn't Latino, but he still chose Spanish as his language of love. I guess Jim figured a foreign language would razzle-dazzle me, especially there in the heartland of Kansas. He constantly told me how beautiful I was—sweet for a boy of 10, which is how old Jim was when he came into my life.

He loved me so deeply and so thoroughly that it left me no choice but to . . . play impossibly hard to get and to be sporadically, completely uninterested. Like at the skating rink on Saturdays. It was my pattern that the more gaga Jim was over me, the more I was forced to flirt with his older brother, Hal.

Don't get me wrong, I wanted to love Jim as passionately and openly as he loved me, but loyalty and devotion just weren't in my makeup at this early age. I was boy crazy as hell, but only with randoms like Steve U., Steve S., Larry C., Jamie K., and Bobby R. These were the ones I was drawn to; the guys who ignored me set my heart aflame.

Hell, I just didn't trust myself to come up to the mark that young Jim had set for me. A few years passed, but Jim's love for me didn't.

It was an "on" period for me and Jim; I was being kind to him and loving him back. We were 10 then, and he seemed much more interesting. Jim's family was extremely wealthy; they owned a huge construction company in Wichita, lived in a huge mansion, belonged to the country club, and had a "children's line."

In today's age, lots of kids have phones in their rooms, cell phones, or private lines, but in the old days kids beat the hell out of each other to talk on the one telephone in the house, and only really rich families had private lines for their children. They were listed just like that in the phone book:

Dr. E. L. Smartyants—316-433-7588

Children's line—316-433-7589

Jim called and asked me to meet him at "fun night" the coming Saturday at his swanky private school, Collegiate. Jim said he and Eddie would be there early, so could I be early, too. Eddie was Jim's best friend, from an even wealthier family. Eddie's family lived in a historic landmark Frank Lloyd Wright house, and Eddie had this extraordinarily beautiful mother. She was single and quite the catch.

My best friend, Becky, went to Collegiate, too. I think all the rich people, including Jim's and Becky's families, got together and built the private school so that their kids could be properly privately educated so as not to end up dumbbells like the rest of us.

I'd already planned to spend the night with Becky and go to Collegiate's fun night with her and Jennifer, another really rich kid whose mother I later ended up being the maid for.

When we arrived, most of the boys were dicking around, acting aloof with the girls. Jim was with Eddie. He didn't care, he came right up to me and said, "You wanna go swing?"

"Swing" of course meant sit on the swings and kiss, which is what we ended up doing for about an hour. Be still my schoolgirl heart! That night I was as smitten with Jim as he was with me.

Jim was wearing a beautiful gold watch, and I was admiring it so that I could touch him more. I was holding his wrist, admiring his watch when suddenly the devil must have risen up from hallowed earth and inhabited me. My burning love for Jim turned into embarrassed, shy, evil intentions. "Oh yes, the watch is beautiful, Jimmy, it's a real beauty, is it a Twist-O-Flex?" I asked.

Twist-O-Flex was a newly invented watch of the 1960s, with a very limber, linked, highly flexible wristband. I knew that this watch was indeed *not* an inexpensive Twist-O-Flex, but with Lucifer lurking in my psyche, I had no will of my own.

"Jim, may I hold your watch?" I asked as slyly as a henhouse fox. He slipped it from his wrist. "It's so gorgeous, Jim," I said softly, coyly, like sugar butter soup. Jim cooed and looked doe-eyed as he admired his fetching gold watch, and then SNAP like a horse's neck at a rodeo. "Jim, is this a Twist-O-Flex?" I grabbed the band with both hands and maniacally twisted the watch into a mangled pretzel. Crackle-twist, twist, torque, crackle, crackle. There! The princess of darkness had done her work.

As quickly as I'd snapped into the Antichrist, I snapped back. There was Jim, looking shocked. His beautiful, contorted gold watch lay in the palm of his hand where I'd quickly deposited it after my "fit."

No words were or could be spoken for several minutes.

"You nut!" he finally said. "Certifiable!" He began to laugh. "You're out of your mind and that's why . . . I love you."

Oh my lord, why can't I find a "Jim" these days? A Jim who thinks I'm gorgeous and extraordinary even when I'm in the middle of a demonic grand mal seizure?

We had so much fun that night. I vowed to love Jim forever and never again flirt with his brother Hale . . . until the following Saturday at the skating rink.

This is how it went for the next two years. His love for me was too overwhelming, and the more I tried to love him back as strongly, the more it triggered the diabolical spirit within my soul, and I would do or say something ridiculous to spoil it and push him away.

Jim was a handsome boy, really handsome, with blue eyes and dark hair, beautiful teeth and a wonderful smile. That's why it's hard to believe that right in the middle of madly making out in a field behind the swim club pool months later, I took the opportunity to trip Jim and wrestle him to the ground, screaming and teasing that he was the only boy I'd ever kissed who insisted on wearing real pointy-toed Beatle boots! Wild with laughter, I yelled, "Beatle shoes, Beatle shoes, Jim Richie wear Beatle shoes!"

Hale later developed a crush on my sister, and that pretty much ruined the brother-flirt thing for me. Besides, I was starting to fall in love with Jim. I'd not made fun of him, broken any of his possessions, or tripped him in months. I hadn't laughed like a hyena at his shoes in weeks. My resistance was crumbling, my demon was quelling.

Jim said he was going camping with Eddie at his ranch on Friday and would call me when he returned on Monday. They were going on a survival weekend, which I thought was very macho, very male. But it was fine with me; I was supposed to babysit the kids across the street on Sunday night anyway, and their mom didn't like me tying up the phone line.

My friend Jennifer called me Saturday morning. She said, "You don't need to come and clean my mom's house today. Oh, and by the way, guess who's dead?"

“I don’t know, who?” I asked.

“~~Jim and Eddie. Jim and Eddie are dead. They got asphyxiated last night at the ranch.~~”

To this day I can’t believe the casualness in Jennifer’s voice when she relayed to me the death of Jim and Eddie.

“*Gotta go now, are you okay?*” asked Jennifer.

Oh yes, I’m fine, good-bye.

Children walk around like zombies just like adults after death, like someone has hit you with something hard, right between your eyes, stunning you into numbness and unreality. I stumbled around this way all day and into the night. On Sunday I was lying on the sofa across the street from my babysitting, when the news came on. My charges were long since asleep, so I was alone when the story of Jim and Eddie came on the 10 o’clock news. As the reporter smirked and told the story of the two Wichita boys from prominent families who had been asphyxiated, the film footage began to show two bodies being carried from the little shack where Jim and Eddie had holed up that night and lit the gas stove for heat. The faulty gas stove with no safety in case the flame went out.

You couldn’t identify which one was Jim and which was Eddie. Blankets were over their bodies. Then I saw something specific, and I knew. The very bad Beatle boots were peeking from one of the blankets. Very pointy Beatle shoes on a camping trip? How absurd.

Hey Jim? Why in the hell are you wearing Beatle boots on a camping trip? Who’s gonna trip you now?

I thought I, myself, would die that night. Partly because of lost love and partly because of all the stupid, mean, evil, thoughtless dumb things I’d done to Jim during our four-year juvenile relationship.

I didn’t stop crying until I arrived at the double funeral for Jim and Eddie. Double caskets, double families, friends, and guests. Eddie’s mother wore a black dress, black stockings, gloves, and handbag and a dramatic black hat, draped with a gossamer veil. She nearly fainted several times as she walked down the long aisle of the Catholic church. Handsome men flanked her and caught her at each falter.

By contrast, Jim’s mother was dressed in a cream-colored suit. Her hair was styled, yet simple. She had a lovely crocheted handbag, and she smiled a lovely, soft smile as she walked down the aisle to her family’s place. She emanated something very powerful—hope and spirituality and knowledge and the certainty that life does not end when our fragile bodies do.

I’ll never forget the contrast between Eddie’s mother and Jim’s. Jim’s mama was radiant in her faith.

You are *muy linda*, I said telepathically to Mrs. Richie that day. You are truly the embodiment of your son’s vast ability to love.

The Art of Queers

I'VE NEVER gone for bisexual men. I just figure they can't make up their minds, and indecisive men don't interest me. I have, however, been heartbroken by one gay man whom I found myself hopelessly in love with when I was 14.

My gay love's name was Jeffrey, and our affair took place at Kansas University when I went to a school for the summer. I was 14. He was 18. I was in love with him. He didn't know I existed.

It was a fine arts school, featuring artists, musicians, and dancers. Although Jeffrey was a ballroom dancer and ran about in tights, it was impossible to detect he was gay.

I knew nothing about people being gay. Literally. I didn't know it existed. It sounds impossible this day when even five-year-olds know the definition. Other than hearing an occasional playground fight ending in "You're a queer!" (which I thought meant "odd"), I'd never heard of a word that would telegraph man-on-man love. Gay, queer, and homosexual didn't exist in my vocabulary. When I was 12, I once shouted out of the backseat of my 16-year-old sister's car, "Hey you queer hoppers!" as she drove by the only homosexual nightclub in Wichita. I had no idea what it meant, but she and her friends were laughing and being obnoxious and were delighted to see some "queers" emerging from the "Chances Are." I thought I was yelling at guys they had crushes on! I liked the word "queer." It sounded funny, and yelling it at men was exhilarating, but it had no connection to the concept of men loving men. And even if someone had told me what queer actually meant, it would have fallen into the same category as when my friend Sarah's sister instructed us on the activities involved with 69.

It would have been far too horrifying for me to comprehend.

When Connie told Sarah and me that girls sucked on men's penises until junk flew out of their vaginas, well, jeez! Sarah and I were forced to stab our fingers with a jackknife, press our blood together, and take an oath that "I hereby swear to God I will never put a boy's dick in my mouth and suck on it until junk flies out, and furthermore, no boy's face will ever come within two feet of my vagina."

This was serious business! Sarah's sister Connie had gotten married at 14 to a guy who was, like, 20! Apparently that was legal in Kansas. Connie knew all the ropes, all the tricks of the sex trade. She'd done it all! And she spilled it all to me and Sarah. Except for the queer stuff. She had no data about queers, and we didn't ask because we didn't know queers existed.

I had a slight inkling about lesbians, not the sexual part or what they were called, just the love part. My pediatrician had lived with her nurse for 30 years. My mom called them old maids, but I could tell that they were really in love with each other. I just thought "old maids" meant two women who'd lived together for a long time without getting married to men. Then there was one of my cousins, who had bigger biceps than my dad, cropped hair, and who strutted around like a dude. I just thought she was really athletic, which she was. My concept of dykes and old maids was skewed, and it certainly didn't involve sex.

But back to Jeffrey. He was about six foot three, I'd say, with black hair and cobalt blue eyes, the lethal combination of features that I can't resist. He didn't look at all feminine. In fact he was

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