

Lisa

John is sound asleep and snoring loudly. He didn't come home until after five this morning smelling like some fragrance I don't even wear, and I'm cross with him. I'm so tempted to hit him while he sleeps. I should have killed him this morning when he came through the door, but I pretended to be asleep. I didn't move even when he called out my name.

He is up to his old tricks again. I can feel it in my bones, but knowing him, asking will only give him permission to deny it and tell me that I am being paranoid. All John has to do is admit that things aren't working out between us and we can cut our ties. He goes his way and I go mine, but no that's too easy. He'd rather fool around on me. I am starting to think he enjoys making me look like a crazy person or maybe he just likes to have his cake and eat it too.

I was certain he was seeing Mona behind my back. Now I'm not so sure since she was with us last night. I'm getting sick and tired of sleepless nights and of putting up with his nonsense. My head pounds; from the alcohol the night before or thinking about this mess with John, I don't know.

The coffee machine gurgles and chokes before spitting out the first drip of coffee. The thing is old and I need a new one, but I'm too frugal to buy one. It will have to break before I invest in another.

The little fiasco between Mona and me last night broke my nails. I called the nail shop and made an appointment. I should call Candy and apologize for my ugly behavior, but I'm too shame to it. This time I don't think a simple "I'm sorry" is going to fix things between us. Candy has always been a good friend to me, and she didn't deserve the treatment I gave her last night.

She pointed out my sin, and I hated her for it. I didn't want to hear anymore of her criticism of me for loosening up for once in my life.

I've been hurting for far too long in this marriage and having Curtis cater to me the way he did last night brought something out in me I've been missing in my marriage. He gave me back my raw animalistic passion. I wanted him, and I wanted him desperately. I already knew my behavior was inappropriate, didn't need to hear it from someone else. Candy made it seem dirty because I took pleasure in another man's company. No, I'm not calling her. I'll give it a few days before approaching her. I scroll down to my mom's number and hit the speed dial button.

"Hello," she bellows as if she's deaf. Her voice makes my headache pound even harder.

"Hi, Mom. It's Lisa," I announce as if she can't recognize her own daughter's voice. She doesn't sound quite like herself this morning. Her coughs sound angrier. She has had this chest cold for almost a month now and has been in and out of the doctor's office with the same result. They don't know what's wrong with her.

"Hi, sweetheart. How's my baby doing?"

"I'm doing fine, Mom. How are? Your cough sounds like it's gotten worse."

"Not good, sweetheart," she says in a raspy voice. "This week has been hard on me. I went to the doctor on Monday and he told me I have high blood pressure. He prescribed some medicine for me to take, but it makes me sleepy. I haven't been able to do anything all week."

"Why didn't you call to tell me this?"

Hearing about this now upsets me. Then I remember telling her not to call me for every little thing, and I could kick myself for my insensitivity. The woman carried me for nine months, the least I can do is be bothered by her.

She sighs heavily. "I didn't want to worry you unnecessarily anymore... you have a lot going on in your life right now and I didn't want to add more to your plate."

"Mom, I'm sorry for what I said the other day. You can call me anytime. I was having a bad day and took it out on you. Can you forgive an insensitive daughter?"

"It's OK, baby. I know you didn't mean any harm. I'm getting old, nothing to worry about. Nobody can stop the will of God when it's their turn," she says with resignation.

Before I can say anything more, she changes the subject.

"How is that handsome husband of yours doing? The last time I spoke to you, you told me he was cheating on you. Accusation of infidelity is a serious charge, you know. Has he straightened out your suspicions?"

She had to go there. My mom has a way of making me feel stupid and inadequate. We constantly butt heads when John is the topic of discussion.

"Straighten out my suspicions? Mom, I know he is cheating on me. Doesn't that bother you?"

"Lisa, honey you need to give it a rest. You don't have any evidence the man is cheating on you. All you have are your suspicions, baby. I'm sure it's that girlfriend of yours who John don't want you hanging around that's filling your head up with these lies about him. You ever wonder why she can't keep a man around? It's because she is her mother's child."

"Who, Candy? She never badmouths John and this isn't about Candy. This is about John and his doggish ways."

The grip I have on the phone tightens and rage fills my lungs. Chanting “she’s your mother” repeatedly in my head clears the rage rising to consume me.

“You haven’t been able to prove that he’s doing anything wrong. Just let the man be a man,” my mom says.

She tsks. The lecture continues. It goes in one ear and comes out the other. I don’t have to commit myself to listening to her nonsense way of thinking. Tapping the receiver, I wait for my moment of escape.

She is like Duracell batteries; she keeps going and going.

“You have a husband that most women would kill for and you want to throw it away, because you think he’s had a few indiscretions. Listen to me, Lisa, a good man is hard to find. Take my advice and let it go.”

I want to say: “The same way you allowed Daddy to be a man when he ran around town on you.” I keep my mouth shut, because I’m not crazy. I may be grown, but my mom will still come through this phone after me.

“Mom I—”

“No, let me finish. You think there is anything better out there? You think because things get a little hard sometimes in a marriage that you can just turn tail and run. You have to fight for your marriage. I didn’t stay married to your father for fifty-three years because I quit when things got rough. I stayed and fought for what was mine. Listen child, our marriage was built on truth and all the women after me were built on a lie, that’s why they never lasted. What God joins together let no man put asunder. When I married your father I took my vows seriously and the only thing that could pull us apart was death.”

She is preaching high upon her pulpit this morning. She is on a roll. I’m quiet now. I have nothing to say. It wouldn’t matter

anyway; when my mom gets this way, the best thing to do is let her have the floor.

“What you need to do is go out and buy some lingerie, cook your husband a good meal and seduce him back into your own bed instead of the bed you think he’s frequenting.

While you busy nagging him, you’re just making it easy for Ms. Fix-it to show up and take your man.”

“Mom—”

She ignores me. I rest my head on the table with the phone lying next to me. Francine Ann Billings is a beautiful biracial woman, born in Ardmore, Oklahoma to Scott and Darlene Brooks. She is one of five children. She grew up extremely poor and spent most of her life struggling to survive until she met my dad. Ernest G. Billings was a man of stature and wealth. He promised her the world and she gave him the chance to live up to that promise. He did, but he was a very unfaithful man.

Growing up I watched my mom let my daddy walk all over her. She allowed him to do what he wanted, when he wanted, and with whom he wanted. She turned a blind eye every time he did her wrong. Her silent cries pierced at my young heart. The burden of shouldering her hurt was too much for a child. I grew older and angrier with my dad for making my mom’s life miserable. I hated him for his womanizing ways and for a while we weren’t on speaking terms.

The two of us didn’t speak to each other until I was away at college and even then, our relationship was strained. Many of the trust issues I have now come from watching him. I was determine not to allow any man to have so much control over me and my emotions that I didn’t have a say in what goes on under my own roof.

My mom thinks the world of John and he does no wrong in her eyes. He is good at camouflaging. John is a very educated man. He is handsome, charismatic, and a good provider, along with manipulative, selfish, and unfaithful. It bothers me the only concern mom has, is what he gives me.

“He gives you everything any woman would want,” she often says. What about my needs? I am not my mom, and try as she might I’ll never be her. Materialistic things don’t impress me. I want his heart, not his wallet.

I felt lucky when I met John. Convinced I had found a man unlike my dad, I married him in haste. My father never laid a hand on my mother. He wasn’t that kind of man.

John, on the other hand, hits women. It happened once, but I fear it won’t be the last.

Mom stops her podium speech and I switch subjects on her. “So what else did the doctor say?” Old age on my side, she doesn’t notice what I have done.

“He didn’t say anything new; just that I need to keep taking these medications, follow a good diet and to keep my stress level down. But how can I when my only—”

Oh no you don’t, I’m not giving you another chance to start in on me. Taking control of the direction in which our conversation should flow, I ask, “Is there anything you need me to do? Do you need me to come by there?”

“No, sweetheart, I’ll be fine. Don’t worry yourself. I’m going back in to see him in a couple of weeks. I should be OK as long as I follow his instructions. Everything should turn out fine.”

I won’t call my mom a liar to her face, but she is lying to me. She is hiding something. I will call Dr. Neil. He has been our family physician for years, and I keep tabs on her health through him.

“OK, well if you need anything will you call me?” I say, hardly keeping the worry from my voice.

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry about me. If I need you, I will call you. And don’t you worry too much about John. That man loves you.” I desperately want to believe my mother.

“I love you, Mom.” She tells me she loves me and then we disconnect.

John is awake. He moves around in the bedroom, opening and slamming draws, then the rummaging stops. I pour two cups of coffee, stir sugar and cream into John’s and hurry back into our bedroom, only to find it empty. The patio doors leading to the indoor pool stand ajar, and I walk through them. At the end of the pool, John stands half-naked in all his glory fixing his goggles.

I clear my throat. “Good morning.”

“Hey baby, are you coming in with me?”

“No, I don’t have anything under this T-shirt.”

“Since when did that stop you?” he asks.

Since you’ve been coming home late in the morning.

“Come on in, the water is perfect.” He splatters water at me to get me to come in. I back up from the edge. He’s in a playful mood this morning, and it ticks me off. The water looks good. I’m tempted to get in with him even though I’m angry. I can’t explain that, maybe the Pheromones he produces have my name on them.

“You standing there with nothing under that T-shirt gives me dirty thoughts,” John says in a suggestive voice.

“You really should come in so I can take it off.”

John’s good at convincing people when he wants something.

He splashes water at me again and this time the water lands right on my bosom. He laughs, and I smile at his childish antics.

The first time I heard that laugh I fell in love with him. This morning his laugh annoys me. It has too much cheeriness in it, and I'm far from being cheery. Taking him up on his offer, I scoot to the edge of the pool and sit. The water warms my legs.

"I thought you might like a cup of coffee."

He wades to the edge of the pool. "Thanks, baby."

I clear the imaginary lump from my throat and ask,

"How was your business meeting last night?"

"It went well. We closed the deal early then we went out to celebrate with the new clients," he says.

Fiddling with the mug, I persist. "Is that the reason you didn't come home until five o'clock this morning? Can't see why anyone who works all day would want to stay out till five the next morning."

I'm fishing for answers and he knows. "Lisa, please don't start on me this morning."

"Start on you what? What? I can't ask you why you didn't get home until the crack of dawn," I ask, the pitch of my voice going up.

"That's not what I meant and you know it. I work hard so we.... No so you can have a roof over your head, money in your pocket, buy the finer things in life, and have a few nice cars to drive around in," he rubs his temple, then his head.

He rattles off all the things that mean nothing to me. I hear him talking and I let him, hoping he will hang himself by saying something stupid.

"I'm a businessman, Lisa. If a client wants me to stay with them until five o'clock the next day, then five o'clock it will be."

Uncomfortable silence passes between us. I'm still not saying much. He's lying. I see it in his eyes. We face-off then he flips

the script. John's good at placing blame on anyone except himself.

“I thought you were asleep when I got home last night. Why didn't you answer me when I called out your name? Yeah, see you like playing games. Are there any women out there who don't play games?” he asks sarcastically.