

THE FRIENDS WE KEEP

by

[Holly Chamberlin](#)

Chapter 1

It's vitally important that men continue to keep secrets from women, and that women continue to keep secrets from men. The entire male/female dynamic relies on misrepresentation and misunderstanding. Why tamper with a good thing?

--Men, Women, and Secrets: It's All Good

EVA

My name is Eva Fitzpatrick. I was born Eve but changed my name to Eva around the time I turned thirty. It seemed to suit me better.

I grew up in a largely nonpracticing Catholic family of Irish and German ancestry and was raised in a very Americanized or culturally neutral way. I know nothing of my family's European roots. My parents didn't speak of a word of German. In spite of our last name we never celebrated St. Patrick's Day. We did not go to church unless it was a relative's wedding or funeral.

Neither of my parents was particularly demonstrative. As the older of two children—my sister, Maura, was born when I was ten—I was expected to be mature almost from the start. I had been working since I was fourteen (I babysat until I could get working papers) and was always a good student. This was partly because I loved learning and

partly because it was expected of me. I did not want to disappoint my parents.

My parents died of cancer—first my father, followed a few months later by my mother—when I was just out of college and looking forward to graduate school. My plan was to earn a PhD in English Literature and then to teach and write. Because my parents had nothing to leave their children but the house and a small insurance policy, I gave up my graduate career, sold the house for the cash, and went to work to support my younger sister. In spite of my urging—or maybe because of it—Maura dropped out of college in her junior year.

Two years after that Maura married a man twenty-five years her senior. A few years later, when his cocaine habit had bankrupted them, she divorced him. Now Maura lives in a small town in Michigan with her second, high school-educated husband and their four kids, all girls: Brooke, Britney, Angelina, and Jessica. On occasion Maura hints at needing money. Her husband, Trevor, works at a gas station as a mechanic and she is a night cashier in a local grocery chain. I send a check to a post office box, as Trevor doesn't accept "charity." I don't know how Maura explains the extra cash.

In spite of the years of financial support, my sister and I aren't close. On occasion, Maura, who is a nice enough person, invites me to visit, but I never do. The thought of staying in my sister's cramped and kid-friendly home (I've seen pictures; there are plastic toys everywhere.) isn't at all appealing and there are no decent hotels nearby. So except for solitary trips to the islands once a year I stay on the East Coast. I hardly ever think of my nieces. Sometimes I realize that I've temporarily forgotten their names.

I am the senior vice president of the most important advertising agency in the Northeast. I say that without a shred of modesty. I worked my way up from secretary; I learned the business the hard way, which is often the best way. I'm successful and I'm proud of my success. I see no sense in hiding my light under a bushel.

I dress the part of an executive in suits and separates. I am fond of heels and not in the least uncomfortable being taller than a man, which does happen given my height of five feet eight inches.

I carry my clothes well, especially the sleek, tailored pieces I favor. I choose neutrals: black, gray, brown, taupe, and white. I haven't owned a pair of jeans since college, when I dressed in whatever was clean and available. These days I don't do casual; I am always what my mother called "put together." People remember a woman with a signature look; she makes an impression.

My hair is professionally colored ultrablond. I wear it close cropped in a face-flattering style. My eyes are brown. The contrast between my bright hair and dark eyes is arresting.

I prefer an oversized leather bag to a more traditional briefcase. Into that bag I stuff any combination of the following: my PDA/call phone of the moment, an extra pair of stockings (in case of runs), a makeup bag, a potboiler novel of the sort I wouldn't dream of admitting to reading, an iPod, my laptop, the latest issues of *W* and *Vogue*, the latest publications of my industry's trade publications, the *New York Times* (I read the *Wall Street Journal* and the Boston papers online.), and a bottle of fortified water (You can never be too hydrated.).

I go to the gym five days a week. For years I worked with a trainer but, having learned a thing or two, now I work out on my own. Currently, at the age of forty-two, I'm in the best shape of my life.

I am not married, nor am I involved in a long-term, committed relationship. I don't date. I have a lover, someone with whom I have regular sex. We're not friends; lover is even too intimate a term to describe who Sam is to me or who I am to him. On occasion I have sex with other men. None of them are ever invited to my apartment.

At this point in my life, I have no one to answer to but myself. Everything, I am pleased to report, is in place.

Chapter 2

Dear Answer Lady:

I'm seventeen and lied to my boyfriend about being a virgin when we met. The truth is I've been having sex (protected) since I was fourteen. I really like this guy and now I'm wondering if I should tell him about my past. Is our relationship doomed because I lied to him at the start?

Dear Poor Little Thing:

You are under no obligation to tell your boyfriend a thing about your past sex life. Has he told you about his? How do you know he hasn't left something out, like the underage girl he got pregnant? How do you know he isn't lying, for example, about never having had an STD? Everyone lies or withholds information about their sex life. It's normal. So keep your past to yourself and don't give up on the condoms.

JOHN

My name is John Alfredo Felitti. My parents came to this country from a small town just north of Naples, Italy, when they were still in their teens and unknown to each other. Each joined family already in Windhill, a suburb of Boston. Within a year of their separate arrivals they were married. Five years later I was born. During the interim

between the wedding and my birth my father established a decent business as a tailor.

Two years later my sister Theresa was born. We call her Teri. Today she works as manager of a successful clothing store in the Prudential Mall and is married to a guy named Frank. Frank is midlevel management with the electric company. They have three kids: a four-year-old girl named Jean Marie and twin boys, Andrew and Scott, aged twelve. Every summer they go to Cape Cod for a week. In the past few years they've offered to take along our parents but Mom and Dad aren't interested in the beach.

A year after Teri came along, my youngest sibling was born, Christina. Chrissy is married to a guy named Mike, who is in construction. Chrissy works part-time as a salesclerk. The rest of her days and nights are spent being a parent to ten-year-old Lucy (after our mother, Lucia) and eight-year-old Paul (after our father, Paulo). Both Teri and Chrissy are active in our parish church, St. Boniface. Much to my parents' dismay, I haven't graced the door of a church since high school graduation, except, of course, when performing a family duty.

Teri and her family, Chrissy and hers, and my parents all still live in Windhill in houses only minutes from one another. Our family is a close one, with few if any smoldering resentments and rare displays of outright anger. Unless, of course, someone "acts up." Then my mother lets fly with dramatic gestures and pleas to God to take her to his side, etc., etc., until the offender apologizes profusely, at which point Mom blesses herself with the sign of the cross and shuts up. Hey, it works for her. We all find our strengths and play to them.

I have been told that I have a commanding presence. I'm six feet two inches. My shoulders are broad. My body is in shape, thanks to almost daily workouts. My face, which still retains something of youth, is made to seem more serious and mature by my glasses—I have several pairs, with stylish designer frames. (I wear contacts only when exercising.) My hair has thinned only slightly. I'm an anomaly

in my family. My parents and my sisters are short and have much darker complexions than I do. My father used to joke that I was a milkman's son (My mother would giggle and smack his arm.), but in truth I take after my father's older brother, long dead (I know him only from pictures.), who towered over the rest of the family. (Maybe he was the milkman's son.)

From childhood, I've had a sense of my own importance. I was the firstborn, the only son of very old-fashioned people. It was a struggle at first but over time it became a habit—not to indulge that sense of importance, but to choose to believe that I'm in this world for a purpose, and that purpose is to do good for others. Since as far back as I can remember I've been the go-to guy for just about everybody I've ever known. If I'm going to command attention, then I'm going to use that power for the good. No one likes a self-important asshole. The last thing I want to be considered is stuck-up, full of myself, arrogant. I work hard to be humble. It hasn't always been easy, when other people see you as something special.

Poor me. I'm teetering on the brink of sounding like a self-pitying wretch, and no one likes those either.

Chapter 3

Maybe she can't see you this weekend because her mother really is coming to town for an antique doll convention. Maybe he's late every Tuesday because he really is taking lute lessons. The unlikely does occur; the unusual does take place. Don't automatically dismiss an excuse because it sounds "creative."

--Recognizing a Lie: It's Not as Easy as You Think

SOPHIE

I was born Sophia Jimenez. I am an only child. My mother doesn't like talking about "such things" but over the years I gathered that although she and my father tried hard (how hard I don't know) to have another baby, it just didn't happen.

Growing up I didn't mind not having a brother or sister. I guess I still don't. You know, they say you don't miss what you've never had.

My paternal grandparents were Cuban. They came to the United States when my father was four years old. They were very Catholic. When my father eventually married, he chose a woman who had been raised in the Episcopal Church. My grandparents were uneasy about this until my mother agreed to raise the children Catholic. They couldn't do anything about my mother's not being Cuban, though. But my mother won them over. She's a very big-hearted person; people take to her right away. Besides, her own family was never a close one. My mother was happy to have in-laws who showed so much interest in her—far more than her parents ever did.

I had a smooth childhood. I did well in school and had plenty of playmates. When I was in college my grandfather died. That was the first really bad thing that happened to me. My grandmother lived another ten years, and though the last three of those years were spent in a nursing home, she never complained.

In my freshman year of college I met Eve Fitzpatrick and John Felitti. Eve became my first real best friend; in high school I was part of a loosely knit group of girls but not one of them had become a real confidante.

John was the first male friend I ever had. In our sophomore year we sort of went out for a few weeks but it was a mistake and due to too much beer at a party. We were both relieved when the “relationship” ran out of steam (not that it had much steam to begin with) and we could go back to just being friends. We never told Eve about it; she hadn’t been to the party—it was a campus thing John and I sort of wandered into. I don’t know why but we felt that the “relationship” should remain our little secret.

When I was a senior, I met Brad Holmes. He impressed me because he knew exactly what he wanted to do after school: make money. He was a whiz in economics and math, in all the subjects that left me cold even when I could figure out what was going on. He treated me nicely, holding doors and buying me dinner, all that old-fashioned stuff my parents had taught me was important. When at Christmas he asked me to marry him after graduation, I immediately said yes. My parents were pleased. Brad’s parents were less so. They wanted him to finish graduate school before settling down with a wife. But I won them over, just like my mother won over her prospective in-laws.

Brad and I were married the summer after graduation. Eve and John weren’t at the wedding. It was held on an island in the Caribbean—Brad’s parents’ choice—and neither of my friends could afford the price of airfare and accommodations. I was disappointed they couldn’t be there for my “big day,” but at the same time I was giddy with

excitement—the dress, the ring, the reception, the exotic location!—I almost didn't notice their absence once the festivities began.

It wasn't long before I was pregnant. Jacob Michael Holmes was almost nine pounds at birth and delivered by a C-section. Jake was a healthy and happy baby. I doted on him and so did Brad, to the best of his ability. Brad knew how to do all the right things but he wasn't, still isn't, an affectionate man.

When Jake turned three, we relocated to Los Angeles. Brad got an offer he couldn't refuse—for the sake, of course, of his wife and son—from one of the big studios. Brad's career flourished and the three of us lived very comfortably. For the first few years I was lonely for my hometown of Boston, but eventually I adjusted. Twice a year I traveled back East with Jake, and sometimes Brad came along. His parents, who were fairly well off, came to see us whenever their busy social life allowed, but they never stayed in our house, preferring instead a luxury hotel. My parents, solidly lower middle-class (at the time there was such a thing), did stay with us when they visited, which was usually in February or March, months that are often dreary and depressing in New England.

Over time our parents traveled less frequently. Age took its inevitable toll on their mobility and their desire to be far from home. When Jake was twelve, his paternal grandfather died. After that, his paternal grandmother went to live with Brad's older brother, Gary, in a suburb of Chicago; her last trip to LA, with Gary, was for Jake's graduation not more than a year ago. She looked terribly frail and, not to be morbid, but I suspect that the next time I see her will be at her funeral. Gary confided that Mrs. Holmes had cancer and that she'd decided not to undergo a long and painful treatment.

And my parents? Now they divide their time between their modest house in Freeham, Massachusetts, and their modest condo in an over-55 development in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. They seem content and their health is good but for the usual, annoying ailments that come with advancing age.

Anyway, back to my life in L.A. When Jake reached high school, I found myself with time on my hands so on a whim I took a real estate course and got my real estate license. Honestly, the job was always more of a hobby than a career. We really didn't need my income, but I enjoyed the social aspects of the job, meeting new people and having someplace to be every day. Everyone wants to feel needed.

And with no close friends, a son who was growing more independent every day, and a husband who spent most of his time with his colleagues, I did need to feel needed. Until, I don't know, I just sort of lost interest—and quit.

So where was Eve all this time? Back East—and out of touch. Over the past twenty years or so my friendship with Eve, once so strong, gradually slipped away. There were no bad feelings, simply two lives diverging. I've often asked myself why.

Maybe the answer is that after college our lives took such different paths. My life played out pretty much as I'd wanted it to, but Eve's did not. For one thing, Eve never married. She'd intended to, and had planned on having two or three children.

I can't help but think that Eve's not marrying and her not having a child alienated her from me, and me from her. Maybe if she'd shown an interest in Jake our friendship might have survived. Eve could have been a sort of aunt to Jake; I would have liked that. But Eve rejected every attempt I made to involve her with my new family. I know she was upset about her parents' death and about having to postpone graduate school indefinitely. Not that she ever admitted to feeling sad or angry or depressed. But she must have been and maybe that was part of the reason she rejected a relationship with Jake...and part of the reason she chose to abandon a friendship with me.

Maybe it doesn't make much sense but it's all I can come up with. I'm not sure I'd ever have the nerve to ask Eve why she didn't want to spend time with Jake and me. I'm not at all confrontational. Maybe, someday, she'll tell me on her own. Maybe she'll open up about those

years just after her parents died and her life was thrown wildly off course.

I hope so.

Chapter 4

Dear Answer Lady:

A few months ago I met this really great guy. We started dating and have even talked about getting married. My friends think he's adorable. Anyway, this past weekend we visited his mother's house (his father is dead). I was coming back from the bathroom when I overheard his aunt and mother saying: "Should we tell her about him?" and "No, he's different now, everything will be okay." They shut up when I came into the kitchen. Since then, I've been wondering if they were talking about me and if the "he" was my boyfriend and if so, what are they not telling me? Should I confront my boyfriend? What if he's hiding something awful about his past? Or should I just forget what I heard and go ahead with our relationship, which, as I said, is really great?

Dear Person-Who-Needs-to-Know-That-Ignorance-Is-Not-Always-Bliss:

Ordinarily, I advise against the need for full disclosure. Everyone has a right to his or her past. But in this case, I advise you to get to the heart of the matter before you wind up in several bloody pieces strewn throughout the house. This supposedly great boyfriend could, in fact,

have a criminal record and be guilty of anything from embezzlement to murder. And be sure to bring reinforcements when you confront this supposedly great boyfriend. A large man armed with a semiautomatic weapon is a wise choice of backup.

EVA

Where the hell was my assistant? On the fifth ring I picked up the phone.

“Eva Fitzpatrick.”

“Oh. Is this Eve Fitzpatrick?”

“This is Eva Fitzpatrick. Who is this?”

“I’m sorry,” the voice said. “I was looking for an old friend from college, someone named Eve Fitzpatrick.”

“I didn’t catch your name.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, it’s Sophie Holmes. It used to be Jimenez.”

I had a strong urge to disconnect the call. I shook off the urge and said, “Sophie, this is Eve. Except that I changed my name to Eva.”

The voice, the woman, Sophie laughed with relief. “Oh, my gosh, it is you! Hello!”

I sat heavily in my desk chair. “Well, Hello. It’s been a long time.”

“I know, too long.”

“So, why—I mean, where are you living these days?”

“That’s why I’m calling, I’m back in Boston. Brad and I, well, we’re divorced.”

I had never much liked Brad. Very full of himself. “Oh,” I said.

“Yes. Anyway, my son’s in school here now so I thought, why not come back East? Plus, I’d be close to my parents and it would give me an opportunity to look up some old friends.”

“Yes, well.” Oh, I thought, here we go. I was going to kill my assistant for this. It was easy not to return a call. It wasn’t as easy to reject a person face-to-face, as it were.

“So,” Sophie went on, “I was wondering, would you, you know, want to get together some time?”

Why, I thought can’t people leave the past alone? It was past for a reason—it was over.

“Eve? I mean, Eva?”

“Yes,” I said resignedly, “okay. I could meet for a drink.”

I suggested one of my favorite restaurant bars. If I was going to allow myself to be hauled down memory lane, at least I could be eating oysters while at it.

Chapter 5

If you gain a deserved reputation as a keeper of secrets, your social value will soar. Everyone wants a friend to whom he can spill his ugly guts without fear of those ugly guts being publicly displayed. Plus, you’ll probably get a lot of free meals being such a cherished friend.

--The Social Value of Keeping Secrets

JOHN

My keeper of the gate, my right-hand woman, and though this might be unusual, my friend, is a woman named Ellen Mara. She’s been with me, with the firm, for almost five years now and I hope she’s with me—wherever I am—for the next fifteen at least. Why Ellen didn’t go to law school I’ll never understand; she’s one of the keenest minds I know. She claims she was too lazy to get her law degree but I’m not buying it.

Ellen is fifty. I know this because she told me. I hope I'm not breaching professional ethics by saying she has a great body—what I've seen of it, of course. She often wears fitted skirt suits, but tweaks the sophisticated look with one-of-a-kind jewelry she buys at craft shows.

Ellen's husband, a guy named Austin who I've met on a few occasions, is in finance at one of the major firms in town. They have a small vacation home on a lake somewhere in Maine; they keep the exact location a secret to avoid pop-ins and never invite friends or family to stay with them. Ellen has told me they feel it's important for a couple to have a place entirely their own. I suppose she's right but I can't imagine ever trying to keep my family from barging in on my vacation house when I settle down enough to buy one. They'd track me down like bloodhounds. Besides, the guilt would kill me. In my family, what belongs to one person belongs (potentially) to every person. This is one reason why I chose to live in town rather than in Windhill, where Teri, Chrissy, and my parents all live. Some buffer zone is required if I'm to live any sort of independent life.

I was on my second cup of coffee, which means it was about ten-thirty, when Ellen buzzed me. (I know "buzzed" is no longer an accurate way to describe this function, but I like it.)

"John," Ellen said. "There's a Sophie Holmes on the phone."

The name didn't register at first. I hear what seems like thousands of names a week, some I recognize, some I don't. And then the image of a young, laughing woman with long dark hair, and half-dorky glasses popped into my head. Could it be?

"Thanks, Ellen," I said. "I'll take it."

Chapter 6

Dear Answer Lady:

I work in the produce department of this supermarket. The pay isn't great but the hours are okay. Besides, I'm studying for my GED and until I get my high school diploma I don't have much choice as far as jobs go. The thing is, almost everyone I work with in produce takes home fruit and vegetables. I mean, without actually paying for them. Not a lot, like maybe a couple of bananas or a head of lettuce at a time. They've been doing it for years. Until last week I refused to join in but then, one of the guys started ribbing me for being a wimp so I took home a bunch of grapes. Nobody found out and since then I've taken home more grapes and am thinking about going for a bag of tomatoes next. It's not hurting anybody, right?

Dear Thief:

I've heard that you can study for the GED while serving time in prison. Hey, I bet it helps wile away the hours. Are you a religious person? If so you might remember the commandment that forbids the act of stealing. Unless you have a starving wife and child at home and the grapes (and possibly tomatoes) are their only source of nutrition, stop STEALING from the business that employs you.

SOPHIE

John seemed genuinely pleased to hear from me. Eve—Eva—on the other hand, didn't. But maybe I caught her at a bad time.

Oh, well, I thought, what's done is done. I was to meet Eve—Eva (that would take some getting used to)—for drinks. John was all booked up until the following week but promised to call then.

Eva had asked me, well, in fact she'd told me, to meet her at Churchill on Tremont Street across from the Common. This, I read in the paper, was a popular new place with a "power clientele." With these intimidating words in mind I ventured to my closet. It didn't take long to realize that I had nothing appropriate to wear.

Over the years I'd cared less and less about my appearance. I'd let the gray in my hair show through and as for clothes, well, though I wasn't much heavier than I was in college, I'd taken to wearing clothes meant to deemphasize my figure. Loose tops and flowing skirts were comfortable and easy to care for, but now, about to meet someone I hadn't seen in almost twenty years they seemed. . . dull.

I closed the closet door and decided to treat myself to an afternoon of shopping at the Prudential Mall. I wasn't at all sure what I was looking for but for the first time in years the notion of new clothes seemed exciting. New clothes, a new life, and renewed friendships. What could be bad?

Chapter 7

For the select few, lying is more than just an occasional indulgence. It's a way of life, constituting both a need and a desire. For such an individual born to live a life of deception—deception of others as well as of self—it's important that he believe the words he speaks. If the dedicated liar begins to doubt his own falsehood, then what peace of mind can he ever know? And isn't the natural-born liar as deserving of happiness as the truthful man?

--It's the Truth If You Believe It, or Life as a Sincere Liar

EVA

I was surprised to hear from Sophie Holmes. The last time I saw her was when her son, Jake, was a toddler, just before Sophie moved to the West Coast so that Brad could take an important job he'd been offered by one of the big studios. Her parents threw "the kids" a going-away party, and though it meant I had to take a night off my job as a waitress—one of several jobs I was working at to support my sister and me—I went.

I didn't have much to say to Sophie by then; our lives had taken such incredibly different directions. I vaguely remember us hugging awkwardly when I left to catch a train back into the city. I don't remember Jake at all; maybe he was asleep somewhere. I do remember John sailing in with his latest girlfriend in tow; I'm not sure

we said more than a word that evening. John had finished law school, Sophie was married and a mother. I was the only one not doing what I thought I would be doing at the age of twenty-four.

For a while after Sophie moved to the West Coast we sent each other birthday and Christmas cards. Sometimes they included dashed-off notes about what was going on in our lives; Sophie often included wallet-sized department-store portraits or school photos of Jake. I have no idea where those photos are now. I suspect I tossed them at some point, probably after the cards stopped coming—or I stopped sending them. Who forgot a birthday first? Who was too exhausted from holiday shopping to send a Christmas card? I couldn't remember.

I also couldn't remember much about our friendship during the four years of college. This wasn't terribly surprising. I learned early on, right after my parents' untimely death, that dwelling on the past is simply unproductive. And every moment of life should be productive. If the past has to be let go of to ensure the future, then so be it. Repression or willed forgetfulness can be powerful tools on the road to success. Recovered memory? Not for me. What I've forgotten I believe I've forgotten for a very good reason; it was inconsequential.

And yet, I found myself willing to meet Sophie for a drink. I wouldn't commit to dinner; I wasn't prepared to spend an entire evening with her. But I was willing to see how things would go, maybe out of simple curiosity. How had Sophie fared since I'd last seen her? Did she look older than her forty-two years, or younger? And how would I compare?

Stranger still, I found myself wondering if whatever it was that had drawn us together in college, whatever it was that had made us friends, would be there again, after all this time.

And if it was there, I wondered if I would care.

Chapter 8

Dear Answer Lady:

My wife just dyed her hair a shade of red I find repulsive. Should I tell her that every time she walks in the room I want to vomit?

Dear Incredibly Stupid Husband:

Keep your incredibly stupid mouth shut.

JOHN

I'd been thinking a lot about my personal relationships, even before Sophie's call. And I'd come to the realization that other than my father and brothers-in-law, I don't have any male friends—and I wasn't sure I could properly call family members friends. Sure, there were a few colleagues with whom I occasionally had a drink or caught a ball game when someone scored free tickets. And although I work out almost every day at a local gym, I avoid getting into locker room conversations. I'm there to do a job—keep my body in some semblance of order—and once the job is done for the day, I'm gone.

Maybe, I thought, having no guy friends wasn't a problem.

There is one guy in my office who deserves a mention in this context. His name is Gene Patton. He's thirty-three and a rat of a guy, a real sleaze. He regularly cheats on his doting, stay-at-home wife, a sweet woman named Marie. I met her at last year's company Christmas party, at which Gene completely ignored her, compelling me to spend an entire half hour chatting with her. She's not a great conversationalist but short of dragging her bum of a husband to her

side by his ear, I wasn't going to let her stand there all alone in her not-so-fine finery, looking like a scared rabbit.

I meet so many women in the course of my work who've wound up with such disgusting specimens of my sex and always I ask myself: How and why did this happen? There are all sorts of answers, of course, from the economic to the personal, from social strictures to family pressures. But even when I learn the specifics of a particular story I'm still left wondering. I still feel unsettled.

But back to Gene. Not only is he a slime in his personal life, he's also a major tax evader. Understandably, I'm uncomfortable with this knowledge but my personal code of ethics forbids me from ratting on a buddy. Gene might not be a friend but he is in a way a companion and while I can advise him never again to mention his illegal activities to me, as I am, in fact, an attorney, I also won't turn him in to the IRS. So sue me.

As if cheating the government isn't bad enough, this guy never picks up a tab when a few of us from the firm go out for a drink after work. We're wise to this habit and have devised several schemes to leave Gene stuck with the bill whenever the tab is particularly high.

Still, I tolerate this guy's presence. And sometimes it keeps me awake at night wondering why.

It's pretty clear to me that a lot of Gene's hanging around my office is due to a rabid desire to get in good with one of the firm's partners. I'm no fool—I'm not going to award Gene anything he doesn't deserve—but the fact is I'm a bit of a lonely guy these days. I'm not proud of it, but sometimes I find that spending an hour with a creep is better than spending an hour by myself. And Gene does understand some of my professional pressures. In spite of his severe character defects, he is a pretty good attorney. Okay, some might say his professional skills are a direct result of his defects as a human being. Suit yourself.

As long as I'm confessing, I'll go further and admit that on occasion, I'm amused by Gene's antics—the ones that cause no real

harm to anyone but himself, of course, like when he's forced to give a report at a staff meeting while nursing a hangover.

That said, I have counseled Gene on his appalling behavior as a husband, but I know that my words fall on deaf ears. If Gene's going to undergo a personal epiphany, it won't be a result of my influence. My ego isn't so big that I believe I can make a real difference in his life for the better.

There's one more thing I want to say regarding my troublesome colleague. In my more harried moments—I should say, in my most harried moments—I wish that I could be a bit less concerned with other people's problems and a bit more concerned with my own happiness. I wonder what it would be like to be a little like Gene, a self-serving person instead of a giver.

Of course, it's impossible that I would ever morph into a Gene, even for an hour. It's simply not in my nature to be. . .to be what I'm not. I'm not bragging; I'm fully aware that I'm no saint. And I'm not seeking pity; my life is a pretty damn good one.

In fact, it seems to me that my entire life has been charmed.

School came easy for me, right from the start. My mother tells me that I was reading before I got to kindergarten. I don't remember a time when I wasn't reading, so maybe she's telling the truth and not exaggerating, something she tends to do talking about her children's finer points.

I went to a private high school on an academic scholarship, then graduated from college at the top of my class. After that, it was law school, where I made law review even while maintaining a very active nightlife.

I've been told I'm a good-looking guy, and I have plenty of evidence that I'm personable (for that, I thank my father, who could charm a smile out of a corpse). Yeah, I use my looks and personality to meet women—why not? But the game stops there. I don't lie to women; I don't promise anything I can't deliver. That doesn't mean that some women have accused me of leading them on, of toying with

their feelings. I've never made a promise of forever or of exclusivity, but some people hear what they want to hear.

At the age of thirty-five, I made partner in my firm. For a while I felt as if I was on top of the world. And then the loneliness began to seep in through the cracks of my bright-and-shiny life. "Bright and shiny" usually implies a quality of brittleness. Time causes stress, stress causes cracks, and in through those cracks trickles grim reality.

Still, I did nothing about the loneliness except to let it continue to seep in and crowd me. I was busy. That was my excuse for ignoring the ultimately more important aspects of my life.

And then I hit forty, and realized that I was the only single man of my professional or personal acquaintance. Even those guys who were divorced were actively in the process of signing up another wife while spending fun filled weekends with their kids from the first one. No man in the firm, gay or hetero, was going home to an empty apartment except me.

The loneliness had become loud and insistent, a giant wave rather than seepage. Something had to be done. But what?

Here's what I came up with, the grand plan. Step One: No more casual sex. I'd come to realize that a lot of the thrill of casual sexual encounters had worn away. Not all of it—my libido is as high as any guy's—but somehow, the effort, which was, admittedly, minimal, just didn't seem worth it. Most times. Okay, so I expected some trouble adjusting to this new rule of delayed gratification but I was confident I could adopt new habits.

Step Two presented itself to me in the form of a phone call from Sophie Holmes, Sophie Jimenez back when I knew her in college. After years in Los Angeles she'd moved back to Boston and was hoping to reconnect with me and another of our college friends, a woman named Eve Fitzpatrick.

Step Three would have been Step Two if Sophie hadn't emerged from the past. Step Three was to begin to look in a serious way for Ms. Right.

I'm a guy. I identify a problem and I go about solving it in a methodical fashion. Which is not to say that love was ignored in the project. I knew myself well enough to know that without genuine love I'd never be able to pull off a trip to the altar.

I'll admit I wondered if the newly divorced Sophie might be looking for a husband. It might, I thought, be easier to rekindle a friendship—and have it build into a romance—than to start from scratch. I'm not lazy, but the notion of dating with intention was daunting.

And what about Eve as a candidate for the role of loving life partner? The answer to that would be a big fat *no*.

Back in college I had a crush on Eve but I never pursued it. I'm not stupid, nor am I a masochist. Eve never gave me the slightest clue that she might be interested in me. In fact, she spent a good deal of time berating me for being self-important and overly fond of pretty but stupid women.

Besides, after a failed fling with Sophie, which, thankfully, ended with our friendship intact, I was hesitant to risk another friendship with a woman I admired. Sure, Eve seemed to find me morally repulsive, but she also continued to count me as a friend. Go figure.

Anyway, a few years ago I ran into Eve at a big fund-raiser. At first, she didn't recognize me, which I found a bit surprising, as I've been told I haven't changed all that much since college. But maybe I shouldn't always believe my mother.

I introduced myself and from that moment the conversation, if it could be called that, was all about the guy she was seeing and how fantastic he was. I remember being suspicious about the whole thing. In my experience, when one member of a couple (or worse, both) claims that everything is perfect, the relationship is just about to tank.

I also remember being struck by how much Eve had changed. For one thing, what was with the name change? The tall, superblonde, stylishly dressed woman I met at that fund raiser was a carbon copy of the kind of woman I regularly dated, the kind of woman I'd grown

tired of: fast talking and self-absorbed. The Eve I had known back in college was the antithesis of that woman—deliberate in her speech, and almost entirely other-focused.

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