

"What are you going to do for Christmas?" he says, lying supine on your couch.

"Oh. I don't know. See my parents in New Jersey, I guess." Pause. "Wanna come? Meet my folks?"

A kind, fatherly, indulgent smile. "Charlene," he purrs, sitting up to pat your hand, your silly ridiculous little hand.

He gives you a pair of leather slippers. They were what you wanted.

You give him a book about cars.

"Ma, open the red one first. The other package goes with it."

"A coffee grinder, why thank you, dear." She kisses you wetly on the cheek, a Christmas mist in her eyes. She thinks you're wonderful. She's truly your greatest fan. She is aging and menopausal. She stubbornly thinks you're an assistant department head at Karma-Kola. She wants so badly, so earnestly, to be you.

"And this bag is some exotic Colombian bean, and this is a chocolate-flavored decaf."

Your father fidgets in the corner, looking at his watch, worrying that your mom should be checking the crown roast.

"Decaf bean," he says. "That's for me?"

Say: "Yeah, Dad. That's for you."

"Who is he?" says your mom, later, in the kitchen after you've washed the dishes.

"He's a systems analyst."

"What do they do?"

"Oh . . . they get married a lot. They're usually always married."

"Charlene, are you having an affair with a married man?"

"Ma, do you have to put it that way?"

"You are asking for big trouble," she says, slowly, and resumes polishing silver with a vehement energy.

Wonder why she always polishes the silver *after* meals.

Lean against the refrigerator and play with the magnets.

Say, softly, carefully: "I know, Mother, it's not something you would do."

She looks up at you, her mouth trembling, pieces of her brown-gray hair dangling in her salty eyes, pink silverware cream caking onto her hands, onto her wedding ring. She stops, puts a spoon down, looks away and then hopelessly back at you, like a very young girl, and, shaking her head, bursts into tears.

"I missed you," he practically shouts, ebullient and adolescent, pacing about the living room with a sort of bounce, like a child who is up way past his bedtime and wants to ask a question. "What did you do at home?" He rubs your neck.

"Oh, the usual holiday stuff with my parents. On New Year's Eve I went to a disco in Morristown with my cousin Denise, but I dressed wrong. I wore the turtleneck and plaid skirt my mother gave me, because I wanted her to feel good, and my slip kept showing."

He grins and kisses your cheek, thinking this sweet.

Continue: "There were three guys, all in purple shirts and paper hats, who kept coming over and asking me to dance. I don't think they were together or brothers or anything. But I danced, and on 'New York City Girl,' that song about how jaded and competent urban women are, I went crazy dancing and my slip dropped to the floor. I tried to pick it up, but finally just had to step out of it and jam it in my purse. At the stroke of midnight, I cried."

"I'll bet you suffered terribly," he says, clasping you around the small of your back.

Say: "Yes, I did."

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Some nights he says he'll try to make it over, but there's no guarantee. Those nights, just in case, spend two hours showering, dressing, applying makeup unrecognizably, like someone in drag, and then, as it is late, and you have to work the next day, climb onto your bed like that, wearing perfume and an embarrassing, long, flowing, lacy bathrobe that is really not a bathrobe at all, but a "hostess loungecoat." With the glassed candle by your bed lit and burning away, doze off and on, arranged with excruciating care on top of the covers, the window lamp on in the living room, the door unlocked for him in case he arrives in a passionate flurry, forgetting his key. Six blocks from Fourteenth Street: you are risking your life for him, spread out like a ridiculous cake on the bed, waiting with the door unlocked, thinking you hear him on the stairs, but no. You should have a corsage, you think to yourself. You should have a goddamned orchid pinned to the chest of your long flowing hostess coat, then you would be appropriately absurd. Think: What has happened to me? Why am I lying like this on top of my covers with too much Jontue and mascara and jewelry, pretending casually that this is how I always go to bed, while a pervert with six new steak knives is about to sneak through my unlocked door. Remember: at Blakely Falls High, Willis Holmes would have done anything to be with you. You don't have to put up with this: you were second runner-up at the Junior Prom.

A truck roars by.

Some deaf and dumb kids, probably let out from a dance at the school nearby, are gathered downstairs below your window, hooting and howling, making unearthly sounds. You guess they are laughing and having fun, but they can't hear themselves, and at night the noises are scary, animal-like.

Your clock-radio reads 1:45.

Wonder if you are getting old, desperate. Believe that you have really turned into another woman:

your maiden aunt Phyllis;

some vaporish cocktail waitress;  
 a glittery transvestite who has wandered, lost, up from the  
 Village.

When seven consecutive days go by that you do not hear from him, send witty little postcards to all your friends from college. On the eighth day, when finally he calls you at the office, murmuring lascivious things in German, remain laconic. Say: "*Ja . . . nein . . . ja.*"

At lunch regard your cream of cauliflower soup with a pinched mouth and ask what on earth he and his wife *do* together. Sound irritated. He shrugs and says, "Dust, eat, bicker about the shower curtain. Why do you ask?"

Say: "Gee, I don't know. What an outrageous question, huh?"

He gives you a look of sympathy that could bring a dead cat back to life. "You're upset because I didn't call you." He reaches across the table to touch your fingers. Pull your hand away. Say: "Don't flatter yourself." Look slightly off to one side. Put your hand over your eyes like you have a headache. Say: "God, I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he says.

And you think: Something is backward here. Reversed. Wrong. Like the something that is wrong in "What is wrong with this picture?" in kids' magazines in dentists' offices. Toothaches. Stomachaches. God, the soup. Excuse yourself and hurry toward the women's room. Slam the stall door shut. Lean back against it. Stare into the throat of the toilet.

Hilda is worried about you and wants to fix you up with a cousin of hers from Brooklyn.

Ask wearily: "What's his name?"

She looks at you, frowning. "Mark. He's a banker. And what the hell kind of attitude is that?"

Mark orders you a beer in a Greek coffee shop near the movie theater.

"So, you're a secretary."

Squirm and quip: "More like a sedentary," and look at him in surprise and horror when he guffaws and snorts way too loudly.

Say: "Actually, what I really should have been is a dancer. Everybody has always said that."

Mark smiles. He likes the idea of you being a dancer.

Look at him coldly. Say: "No, nobody has ever said that. I just made it up."

All through the movie you forget to read the subtitles, thinking instead about whether you should sleep with Mark the banker. Glance at him out of the corner of your eye. In the dark, his profile seems important and mysterious. Sort of. He catches you looking at him and turns and winks at you. Good god. He seems to be investing something in all of this. Bankers. Sigh. Stare straight ahead. Decide you just don't have the energy, the interest.

"I saw somebody else."

"Oh?"

"A banker. We went to a Godard movie."

"Well . . . good."

"Good?"

"I mean for you, Charlene. You should be doing things like that once in a while."

"Yeah. He's real rich."

"Did you have fun?"

"No."

"Did you sleep with him?"

"No."

He kisses you, almost gratefully, on the ear. Fidget. Twitch. Lie. Say: "I mean, yes."

He nods. Looks away. Says nothing.

Cut up an old calendar into week-long strips. Place them around your kitchen floor, a sort of bar graph on the linoleum, representing the number of weeks you have been a mistress: thirteen. Put X's through all the national holidays.

Go out for a walk in the cold. Three little girls hanging out on the stoop are laughing and calling to strange men on the street. "Hi! Hi, Mister!" Step around them. Think: They have never had orgasms.

A blonde woman in barrettes passes you in stocking feet, holding her shoes.

There are things you have to tell him.

#### CLIENTS TO SEE

1. This affair is demeaning.
2. Violates decency. Am I just some scampish tart, some tartish scamp?
3. No emotional support here.
4. Why do you never say "I love you" or "Stay in my arms forever my little tadpole" or "Your eyes set me on fire my sweet nubkin"?

The next time he phones, he says: "I was having a dream about you and suddenly I woke up with a jerk and felt very uneasy."

Say: "Yeah, I hate to wake up with jerks."

He laughs, smooth, beautiful, and tenor, making you feel warm inside of your bones. And it hits you; maybe it all boils down to this: people will do anything, anything, for a really nice laugh.

Don't lose your resolve. Fumble for your list. Sputter things out as convincingly as possible.

Say: "I suffer indignities at your hands. And agonies of duh feet. I don't know why I joke. I hurt."

"That is why."

"What?"

"That is why."

"But you don't really care." Wince. It sounds pitiful.

"But I do."

For some reason this leaves you dumbfounded.

He continues: "You know my situation . . . or maybe you don't." Pause. "What can I do, Charlene? Stand on my god-damned head?"

Whisper: "Please. Stand on your goddamned head."

"It is ten o'clock," he says. "I'm coming over. We need to talk."

What he has to tell you is that Patricia is not his wife. He is separated from his wife; her name is Carrie. You think of a joke you heard once: What do you call a woman who marries a man with no arms and no legs? Carrie. Patricia is the woman he lives with.

"You mean, I'm just another one of the fucking gang?"

He looks at you, puzzled. "Charlene, what I've always admired about you, right from when I first met you, is your strength, your independence."

Say: "That line is old as boots."

Tell him not to smoke in your apartment. Tell him to get out.

At first he protests. But slowly, slowly, he leaves, pulling up the collar on his expensive beige raincoat, like an old and haggard Robert Culp.

Slam the door like Bette Davis.

Love drains from you, takes with it much of your blood sugar and water weight. You are like a house slowly losing its electricity, the fans slowing, the lights dimming and flickering; the clocks stop and go and stop.

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At Karma-Kola the days are peg-legged and aimless, collapsing into one another with the comic tedium of old clowns, nowhere fast.

In April you get a raise. Celebrate by taking Hilda to lunch at the Plaza.

Write for applications to graduate schools.

Send Mark the banker a birthday card.

Take long walks at night in the cold. The blonde in barrettes scuttles timelessly by you, still carrying her shoes. She has cut her hair.

He calls you occasionally at the office to ask how you are. You doodle numbers and curlicues on the corners of the Rolodex cards. Fiddle with your Phi Beta Kappa key. Stare out the window. You always, always, say: "Fine."

# Self-Help

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Lorrie Moore



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