

The State of the Marriage | MAUREEN LANGLOSS

WELL, THAT'S A PISSER, he says.

Will you stop talking like you're British? she asks.

Word.

Word what? What is that?

Just sayin'. It's wack. The whole *enchilada's* wack.

Would you please stop?

What?

Forget it ...

Forgotten.

What's wack? she asks.

This whole thing. This whole construct.

You built it.

I know. But you helped. We're both bloody in this together.

Oh, no. I may be in it, but I didn't make it. You did that all by yourself. And then you left.

I've been here every day, he says. I haven't left the property in at least a fortnight. Have I not been here every day? Have you seen me bust a move across all that tall grass, over all them mountains?

No, she sighs.

Then where've I been?

I don't know. Sometimes I look at you, and I wonder, where is he? What is he looking at? What is he listening to?

I'm here. In the crib. Talking to your bony ass.

That slang is so old. I don't think anyone says crib or wack anymore. Why do you talk like that?

Like what?

Like you don't know where you're from.

You asked to do this whole "state of the marriage" meeting. And now you won't let me express myself?

Fine. Express yourself. Just don't act like you're in one of those hood places. You're hundreds of miles from one. Always have been.

You know what I think?

What?

I think there's a noise in this house. A noise that won't shut up. It's like there's a big, honking cricket chirping, jumping all through the place. Chirp, chirp, chirping. It's like some singer's trapped in the house. And she's singing real off-key. La, la, laaaaa. She only has one note. And she sings it all day long. It whistles through the vents. It's like the damn washing machine keeps churning. Churning and buzzing and trying to get things clean. But it doesn't matter what the sound is. What matters is that no one will shut it off. What matters is we keep fucking hearing it.

You think that's our problem?

Proper. That's my diagnosis.

Do you have anything you'd care to add?

No. Dassit. Your turn to give it a go. Now hurry up and have at it. I gotta bugger off soon.

But, wait. What about this noise? Is it really bothering you? Because I can't hear it.

Like, duh, it bothers me. It could drive a man crazy.

Don't use that word—not in our house.

Batty, then. Is that better for you? A little more jovial? It could drive a man batty. It could drive a man off his trolley.

You're not taking this seriously.

Are you kidding? I'm stoked. I'm totally amped. You gonna take your turn or what? 'Cuz if you ain't, I'm gonna jet.

I'll take my turn if you stop saying ain't. It's affected.

I reckon *ain't's* the opposite of affected.

If you didn't grow up saying it—in a neighborhood where they say it—then it's affected.

A'ight. Just go ahead.

Fine.

Go.

Give me a minute.

Stop fannying around already.

Fine.

Speak your piece.

It's just that...

Say it already.

Fine. I'll say it.

So?

You never touch me anymore... there. I said it.

Laughter.

Stop it!

Now who's talking like she doesn't know where she is?

I know where I am.

Then why're you talking like we're in a movie? *You never touch me anymore.*
Please. Does this look like a cinema?

We don't go to the cinema. We go to the movies. And this is our house.
Our house.

Really? I thought you'd mistaken it for some stupid love ballad.

If only. If only it were, then maybe you'd touch me. You don't, you know.
You don't touch me.

I touched you Sunday. Didn't we do it Sunday night?

That's just like a man.

Stop talking bollocks.

You don't feel me.

What?

You don't feel me.

Look at these fingers. Look at them. Look at all the little nerve endings.
How can you say I don't feel you? I touch you, bae. I feel you. End of story.

They're not feeling me. They're rubbing across me. But nothing is registering. Nothing's penetrating.

What do you think you're made of? Braille? I mean what the bloody hell is supposed to register?

We're all braille. And you're not reading me. You're not even trying.

So I'm hearing this noise, but I'm not feeling your skin. I think we got this figured out. That's the state of the marriage. Hearing, but not feeling. Glad we got this sorted. Brilliant. I'm gonna go get turnt.

Don't walk away. We're not done. That's your state of the marriage. What about mine?

We're in the same state, my dear.

Well where is that? Because I'm having trouble finding it. And since when do you call me dear?

We are here, *my dear*. My darling. We're here where I stomp. Stomp. Stomp.

Stomp. X marks the spot. Here. See? Inside this eggshell.

All I see are those ugly fake stone tiles. They're totally out of place. I've wanted to fix those tiles from the day we moved in here. From the day we moved from there to here. They're like tombstones.

So change the tiles. I don't care. Rip 'em out. They're too east for all this west anyway.

Silence.

Oh, God! Have you done started cryin'? Shit. Stop. Don't get so fussed, he says. You promised you wouldn't cry.

That's always your solution, isn't it? Just rip it out. End it. You don't want to work on anything, make it better. Make it fit.

Bugger! Are we gonna bring that up again. Haven't we chewed enough fat on that?

You don't want anything ugly to touch you, do you? That's why you did it, isn't it?

Damn, woman. You're the one who's hating on tiles. Me—I think they're the bomb. I love those tiles. They're why I moved here in the first place. They're why I stick around.

Life was touching you too hard. That's why you—

I ain't gonna talk about that. We never get nowhere with all this talk.

Is that where you want to go? Nowhere? Is that where you keep driving us?

I'm not taking us anywhere.

Exactly. We're going nowhere. And we keep getting closer and closer.

I hate when you get all abstract like that. It's like you think we're in some damn play. I hate plays. Too much drama. All talk. Talk, talk, talk.

You won't touch and you won't talk. What's left?

Shhhh.

What?

Shhhh. Listen.

What?

It's the noise, he says. Don't you hear it?

No. I don't hear anything.

That's because you keep talking. Now shut your gob.

Silence.

You know what the worst part was? she asks.

Silence.

The worst part was the letter, she says.

Silence.

I kept it, you know. I still have it. I'll go get it. I'll get it right now. I keep it here in the freezer, here inside an ice cream carton. Praline. Because you hate praline. I froze it.

Silence.

See? Look at it. Read it.

You're rotten, he says.

Read it.

Silence again.

Where are you going? she asks.

Upstairs.

You can't just abandon the state of the marriage. We agreed to rules, remember? No walking out 'til we both say it's finished.

I can't be fagged. We're done.

I'll follow you wherever you go, you know. Like I always have. If you want to take me upstairs, I'll follow you. Now read the letter.

There's nothing to read.

The End.

Stop it.

The End. That's it. The End. That's all you had to say.

Well, that's how I felt.

But why? Didn't you have anything more you wanted to give me? Throw me a bone, tell me you'd miss me. Explain it a bit. Why didn't you say anything else? The End. I mean why did you write this note at all?

It was ironic.

Ironic? You call it ironic? Was that any time to be ironic?

Irony can catch a wave just about any time.

You know what was ironic? All the love letters you wrote to me before. Now those are ironic. I mean what am I supposed to think about all those letters?

You're not supposed to think anything.

Do you realize you signed every single one "The End"? Not love, not best regards, not even sincerely. The End. Now what am I supposed to think of that? Was that ironic too? Were you about to go then too? Profess your love and then Blam! You're outta here. Were you foreshadowing?

Don't get all exercised over this. Jesus. You're panting.

I read those old letters to you every day before you came to. Did you know a man in a coma isn't nearly so calm and peaceful as they make it look on TV? Did you know you were twitching and flailing and making all sorts of ghastly noises?

Jesus.

Just tell me why? Why?

Silence.

You know what I'm thinking, looking out the window here?

I haven't the faintest idea.

I mean, it's a nice enough view from up here. It ain't bad as far as views go. It's downright boss. All that pastoral shit out there. Purple mountain's majesty. But waddyasay we take this show on the road? Waddyasay we find us a new view?

You've got to be kidding.

Do us good to bust loose. It always does.

No. It doesn't. We're just settling in. We're just starting to build—

You're dissing the tile. And I'm dissing the noise. The view just ain't good enough to justify it. It's a half-ass view. It could be better. The water could kick out further. You know? We could have more of it. It could froth.

You said that river was beautiful. You said you could fish all day in it. And nobody says *dis* any more.

Or maybe we should find us some heath. Now where can we find us some a that? Someplace gothic, out on a moor. I bet they got a lot a heath in—

You're crazy! I mean—

See? Even you can't resist saying it!

I'm sorry.

It sounds good doesn't it? Craazyyyyy! Kind a rolls off the tongue, don't it? Your craazyyyyy husband. He's NUTZO. That's what they said after you told 'em all, isn't it?

Is that why you made us move? Cross all those miles just to get here?

Now why would that make me want to move? I mean, why would I ever want to move after you go and tell everyone in the whole bloody town that I tried to shoot myself in the head? And then flinched. Couldn't even do it right.

Hold on. Let's just put that in context.

No, there is no context. I don't want context.

I had to find one. I need it.

I wasn't a show. Did you see a stage under my ass? Did you see curtains on either side of my hospital bed?

As a matter of fact, that's exactly what I saw. There were curtains all around you.

Well, bully for you.

Is that why we had to leave? You didn't like being a show?

No, that ain't why. I don't even know why we're talking about this.

You never want to talk about this.

So don't make me.

I never make you.

Yeah. You're too afraid.

No, I'm not.

You're afraid you'll make the craazyyyy man try to kill his craazyyyy ass again. That's why you let some shrink tell you how to talk to your craazyyyy husband. Well him and his boundaries and rules and score-keeping can piss off! This state of the marriage can get stuffed!

I heard the gun, you know. That's the noise that creeps through my vents.

I'm just sayin' we should find us some heath. Find us some heath and go there.

Then read a book, because that's the only place you'll find heath.

Heath's a barren, coarse place where nothing drains right. It's everywhere.

Then why do we have to move to find it? Why? If it's right here?

Silence.

Answer me? Why? Why not look out these windows some more? Look at all those stones out there on the riverbanks? Isn't that desolate enough for you?

Silence.

I'm not going this time, she says. I'm not going unless you tell me why. Make me understand why I should keep floating through this with you.

It's private, he whispers.

In a marriage, everything is private.

It's not in the marriage. It's entirely outside it.

Don't say that, she whispers. *She puts her hand on his shoulder and then retracts it.* Tell me, she says.

I can't.

I'm here next to you. You can say it. *She sets her hand on his shoulder again.* Why?

Long pause.

Why? What is it?

So—

Yeah?

So—

I'm listening. Why do we have to go?

Forget it.

I'm here. *She leans a centimeter towards him.*

Silence.

Please tell me, she whispers.

Okay.

Yes?

Fine. It's just so that...

She follows the path of his arm with her fingers.

So I don't have to end it, he says.

Her finger stops on the boney plateau of his shoulder.

When it gets so bad, he says, when it starts to take over, I think it would be better to leave this behind, to shed this.

Better than what?

Than going altogether.

You're crying, she says.

No, I'm not.

Why does it get so bad? The sadness. What makes it—

Will you please stop asking that? You've been asking that for months.

No, I haven't.

Not out loud. But you've been asking it every goddamn day.

If you'd just tell me why, then we could find a place to stay.

No.

Just think for a moment.

You're crowding me.

Why? What was it that made you buy that gun?

I'm not gonna talk about this. I've explained enough already.

Was it me? Was there something I did to upset you?

No.

Was it your parents?

Will you stop?

Was it a childhood thing?

No.

Were you abused? That can make a person very depressed.

Step off.

Because for every decision, there's the moment it was made. There's something leading up to it. Pros and cons. A catalyst.

I didn't make some dumb-ass decision tree.

I don't believe you. I refuse to believe that someone can kill himself on impulse.

Would you zip it?

Do you think it's chemical?

No.

Because there are medications that—

Goddamnit! Shut up!

No. I won't. I won't because I hear it. I hear your noise! Going off like a gun in my head. Bang! Bang! Bang!

Quiet!

Bang! Bang! B-b-b-bang!

He rises from the bed and slaps her so hard on the cheek that she falls. He lets his hand follow her to the mattress. He leaves it on her face. He can't see the red coming to the surface under his fingers, but he can feel the heat.

There isn't any why, he says at last, after all this time.

She puts her hand over his hand over her cheek.

The pain just came on. It surged out of nowhere and swallowed me. Left me for dead. If it would explain itself, if it would make even the slightest introduction, we could do something about it. We could maybe chase it away. But it doesn't. It ain't that polite. So it chases me.

It chases us.

Yeah, it chases us.

So there really isn't a reason?

No. Some things just can't be explained.

No matter how hard you try?

No matter how hard.

You don't know why.

I never knew why.

How come you never told me?

'Cuz it doesn't satisfy.
I believe you, she says.
There's no reason.
I know. I believe you.
You do? he asks.
It's a pisser, she says.

∞

They look out the window at their view. Dusk has arrived. They can see the white backsides of the pronghorn antelope heading home for the night. Must be twenty of them, including the fawns. They are too delicate for this place. Too refined. John and Carol walk out onto the porch and down into the grass, toward the Madison River, all the way to the rocks. John limps a bit on his left leg, and Carol pulls a blue jacket around her shoulders. Her hair is the same auburn color John's would be if he were standing under a bright light. The water is running at a good clip, but they can stand in it without it pulling them along if they stick to the edges. They are twenty-five miles from Yellowstone, a hundred miles from Bozeman, ten miles from the Grizzly Bar. Even with the reasonable and prudent speed limit, it would take a while to get just about anywhere. Their driveway is at least three miles long, and none of it's paved. They have to take it slow. They look for activity at the Slide Inn, a smear of a building across the river too wide to cross. Beyond the Slide is the hillside that the last earthquake made when it killed twenty-eight people. The state put a museum of glass up there on the hill where the pikas hide between the boulders, to commemorate the day the earth decided to move.

They'll probably stay in Montana a bit longer. They still haven't done the hike up to the little lake behind the house. People say it's diamond-shaped and surrounded by snow-capped mountains, even in the summer. The meadows they'll have to cross on the way up are long and the grass tall.

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