



BOLERO

Rachel Howard

Oh god, he'd lit a candle. She smelled it as she finished flossing her teeth, just a hint of the cranberry-vanilla she knew he only pretended to like, and then she walked into the bedroom to find an uncertain glow casting shadows upon piles of dirty socks, and her husband in bed, duvet sealed tightly beneath his armpits and a pacifying look in his eyes.

So he *had* been listening earlier that day, when she could contain her vague unrest no longer, and she waited until he finished picking his way through a tricky section of a Chopin scherzo to say suddenly, casually, "You know, we haven't had sex in a while." Three weeks, to be exact, which had not been unusual since around the time of their engagement. There'd been the unfortunate side effects of his new hair medication, months of complaints that he was too stressed at work to deal with it. She'd grown concerned, bought new lingerie, but when she modeled it, he looked trapped. Had some small deep part of her been relieved by his lack of interest even then? Because now that he'd finally seen the doctor and fixed his hormones, now that his hand would slide unsubtly to her breast just as she was turning over to sleep, her heart would seize at his touch.

Now she paused at the bedroom doorway, took a hesitant breath as the candlelight played on the walls. She was wearing turquoise snowflake fleece pajamas, a Christmas gift from her mother, but that was not why, as she watched her husband lift an eyebrow, any residual charge of sensuality left her body.

Her husband raised his chin suggestively. "Maybe you should

Opposite: Thierry Rosset, Posture XX, 2005, linocut, 24 x 18 inches, courtesy: The 8 Gallery, San Francisco

put the cat out.” Gratitude and horror warmed her chest. What an effort he was making! She knew this was his closest approximation of a come-on, remembered the night they first slept together, how endearing it had been that he kept his boxers on until the last possible minute, how he kept his eyes closed, just a sliver of white visible as the irises rolled back involuntarily, how he never made a sound. And yet during those months of falling in love, she’d found herself turned on while driving to work, just thinking about his kiss.

How different that had felt from last night, when she’d surprised him with tickets to see a young Russian pianist at the symphony. She’d hoped the performance might encourage her husband to start playing again, remembering the surprising passion that could pour from his fingertips on the rare occasions when he would. She’d worn strappy platform heels to spice up their date, happy to stir a little scandal among the staid symphony crowd. But even though she and her husband raved to each other at intermission about the Russian pianist’s high drama, her husband’s hand on her hip felt forced, sexless, restricting. So she’d taken her time walking back from the ladies room, scanning the crowd at the lobby bar, spotting her target at the end of the line. Wire-rimmed glasses, tousled hair, leather jacket. “Hot shoes,” he’d said, eyes running up and down her legs. And when he held out his hand to introduce himself, she let the ring finger of her left nestle into the small of her back.

Now this, this felt normal to her! This had felt normal since 14, when she’d given Scott D’Ambrosio blow jobs in the back of the bus on the way home from band competitions, when his bewitched gaze was as obvious a goal, as clear a rationale for performing well, as the gold stars handed to the most voracious readers in grade school. This had felt normal to her all through college, when she hadn’t limited her rapid hook-ups to drunken parties, when she’d gone on actual first dates only to stand at her apartment door, knowing she held the upper hand after a delicious-but-not-quite-promiscuous goodnight kiss, unable to withstand the pull of...not desire, but impatience. This drive to seal the deal, win absolute confirmation of their attraction. And she knew the paradox of her haste: that her unseemly hurry to confirm the attraction killed it at the moment of its consummation. But wasn’t that how the story would ultimately

play out, anyway? She was like someone who knows how the novel ends and so can’t help skimming, pages at a time, to the conclusion. And when she lay in the dark with a near-stranger, and the story was over, and only the void of nothingness lay ahead? She had thought not a few times how strange it was that she should feel so empty and yet so comforted in that emptiness, so immersed in the impossible reality of life, so in harmony with the uncaring universe.

But she had never had the luxury of such doom with her husband, though she’d tried mightily to rush toward it. On their second date, she’d suggested they go to the beach, and she’d removed her panties and laid them crotch up in the sand and waded waist high in the moonlit ocean, skirt hiked above her hips. But he had stared at her like a curiously unruly child and she had felt...ashamed. And when they finally did have sex, weeks later, they’d missed the window for certain doom. He had already said I love you, and she had felt a surge of love in return. There was more tenderness than lust in the way his hands traveled up and down her body. Or so it seemed now, though it must have felt differently at the time.

“Come to bed, honey,” he said. She removed the snowflake fleece pants and slipped between the covers. He had turned on the electric blanket, which was thoughtful, and selfless, because when he went down on her she liked to keep the covers on, and it was hot down there and hard to breathe, and he’d emerge with a humid brow, extracting pubic hairs from deep in his mouth.

She laid her head upon his chest. In the candle glow she could see the patches of long, unruly hairs like weedy grasses along his pale upper arm, and she could imagine the marbled striations on the flesh just above his hips, the flesh that had grown rounder, like well-kneaded dough, since their wedding. She was fleshier, too, a coating of fat atop her stomach like a layer of cake frosting. Neither was what they had been, and yet her husband was still quite handsome. She remembered him at the performance, silver hair attractively offset by a white shirt, shoulders broad and strong. Why hadn’t she wanted him?

His fingers brushed her nipple. Her spine stiffened. She had asked for this. But where was the urgency, where was the need? She had never understood the idea of recreational sex, like scheduling a day at the spa. Once, before their marriage, when

he was between marketing jobs, her husband had found a sex handbook in the apartment and taken to practicing, swirling sexual energy around the pathways of her body one lazy late morning. It was unlike him, and very pleasant. And yet afterward she'd felt awkward, as though she should leave a tip, or make only brief, client-to-masseuse eye contact on her way to the shower.

The thought of massage gave her an idea. "Will you rub my legs?" she said. She was stalling, and as her husband repositioned himself for the task, his big hands encasing her thigh, she was surprised to feel an undeniable erection brush against her hip. She reminded herself to relax as his hands crept upward to grip her buttocks. And then she rolled onto her back and raised her face to let her lips touch his.

They had not really kissed in a long time, and this was not quite a real kiss, either—perfunctory hints of tongue, but mostly an unsure meeting of mouths, like an oral handshake. She remembered one of their early dates, when they stood in the parking lot after the symphony and kissed for an hour, more and more and more, and every possible angle and even the old angles never grew tiresome, even as her neck kinked and her calves ached from standing tiptoe. Surely that had been erotic. And she remembered that even then she had told herself to savor it, because already she knew that she wanted to marry him, but she could not square the ideas of passionate sex and marriage. She felt the same toward the concept of sex in marriage as she had as a ten-year-old toward the idea of bras or menstruation—they sounded uncomfortable and bothersome, but everyone said you should look forward to them. And anyway they were unavoidable, so it must all work out.

But now it wasn't working out. Now she was still dreading, even as he entered. It was a tight fit. She winced from a little stab of pain, and tried to make it look like pleasure. He moved cautiously, and found a better angle, and she breathed deeply and unclenched. She looked up at him, hoping he was enjoying himself. His face was placid, as though he were listening intently to a favorite sonata. They'd found a groove now, and could move back and forth without catching, but still something was off; he pushed inside her the way a child's bottom might careen down a Slip 'n Slide, the contact slick, and worrisomely hard. Still, the pain was passing, and she told herself that if she would just let

her mind go, enjoyment might follow.

And then he stopped. Just pulled out and stopped, sitting back on his knees, scrunching his brows as though sizing up a difficult mechanical project. "Does this feel a bit...uncomfortable to you?" His voice was as loud and plain as if they were talking on the street.

"Uh, a little bit," she said, and as his eyes locked onto hers as they rarely did during the actual act, she could see it: He was angry. A slight glare, a subtle scowl. Her husband was not a man to lose his temper, rarely showed any signs of irritation, but she recognized what had happened: He had had enough.

It startled her. And it made her remember another night last week, when she'd heard an erotic rat-a-tat-tat on the stereo, a snaking saxophone melody, and her husband had slid up to her from behind and laced a hand between her thighs.

Her heart had stopped beating, and she'd flailed for escape. "Bolero? Is this a joke?"

She'd told herself it pointed to the problem between them: that her husband was afraid to be too close, that he had to mitigate that closeness with humor. Not until now had she considered that the problem might be hers

"There's something to help in the bathroom," she said, thinking of the tube of K-Y Jelly she used to squeeze covertly before coming to bed, because she would remember the look on his face that night she'd gone frolicking through the ocean, and think he wouldn't want to know. "Under the sink. Top shelf on the right."

He got up to fetch it, his penis swinging purposefully as he returned, and when he dispensed the magic ingredient he did so with gynecological directness, running his finger deep inside her.

The fit was good now. They found a rhythm, a little plodding but steady, and her husband seemed to be settling into it the way he might slip gradually inside the ebb and flow of an R. Strauss waltz. She watched the whites of his eyes involuntarily appear, but every so often he would lean down to give her a kiss, as if to assure her that he remembered her. And when he did that, she felt that pulling back, that tightening inside herself, and she thought of the men she had known. She thought of the man who took her back to his house only for her to discover photos of his girlfriend on his bedside table, how she'd slept with him

anyway because it was easier than backing out, how she'd realized she didn't have money for a cab home and he'd dug grouchily in his wallet for a five and left her on the street. She thought of another night, under the streetlights, bending over the parking brake to reach the lap of the driver's seat, sucking in her ribcage to avoid the stick shift. She couldn't remember his face, only the breathless way he said, "That was amazing." And then his indifference as he dropped her off without offering his number.

None of those moments had been as terrifying as this moment now. It had not been nearly as difficult to meet the stranger's cold stare as it was to meet her husband's as his eyes opened, as she felt desire lurch deep within like a gearshift finally catching.

But she did it. And the space inside herself was enormous and all-enveloping, and the room with its candle-glow shadows was just one small corner of an infinite universe. And when it was over, she had the same sensation that she was staring across a wide chasm, that she was about to plummet, that she could not understand why she was alive rather than not. Panic. It was familiar, but usually short-lived, usually snuffed by an unkind word or uncaring glance that mercifully ended the story, set her back at the beginning, in search of another target. But now her husband was rolling over to kiss her goodnight, his voice gentle in her ear, his clean smell soothing in her nostrils. And in the back of her mind she could hear a slithering saxophone melody, a teasing snare drum, a bleating of horns as the orchestra reached its climax. □

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Opposite: Thierry Rosset, Serenity I, 2005, linocut, 24 X 18 inches, courtesy: The 8 Gallery, San Francisco

