

I Don't Even Care if I'm Dirty Any More

By Lesley Ann Wernsdorfer

I suppose I'm not much of a girl. I tend to take life pretty seriously and don't concern myself with frivolities like hair and makeup, but every once in a while, I remember what it felt like to play dress-up, so this year for my birthday, I decided I wanted a girl day. My decision was influenced by my friend Vivian. I've been living with her and her husband Jose for the last six months. Our friendship has always been very real, no bullshit. So when I needed a change, she invited me to stay for as long as I needed. Living with them has helped restore my faith in the possibility that relationships can actually work.

Viv has never had a problem being a girl and a woman. She shaves her legs and wears makeup. And I think if she didn't have long black hair that looks best hanging loose, she'd do her hair, too. About two weeks before my birthday, I looked up from my book (I'm always reading) to find Viv staring at me.

—What? I asked.

—I was just thinking, she said seriously. You'd look good with blond hair.

—You know, I've been thinking that recently, I told her. I was thinking of doing the lemon-juice-in-the-sun thing for a while.

—Fuck that, she said. I'm not that patient. How 'bout I give you a hair appointment for your birthday?

—Hmm. Maybe.

So I started my birthday by getting my hair done, then my new girlfriends and I all went for massages and facials. All made up, we went out for a fancy late lunch. They had rented chick flicks, so after lunch, we all headed over to Amy's to watch them. We couldn't keep our mouths shut, which at first disappointed me a little because they'd actually made a good choice for the first movie. It was Vivian's fault. She started leafing through a copy of *People* that she'd lifted from the beauty salon.

—Which Hollywood star could make you do something you said you'd never do? she asked, crossing her long, tanned legs. Everything Viv does exudes sexiness.

—Brad Pitt, Pippa said with surety.

—How 'bout Johnny Depp? He's pretty sexy, squeaked Betsy in the tiny voice that matches her tiny body. She teaches elementary school, and sometimes she acts like it.

—I don't want pretty sexy. I want someone you couldn't resist, demanded Vivian. For me, Aidan Quinn. He's got that strong but sweet thing going on.

—How 'bout Jean-Luc Picard? Amy asked hesitantly, not wanting to reveal her taste. Amy is a little on the chubby side with poker-straight strawberry blond hair, square-cut bangs. She's the manager of one of the banks in town. Her husband recently walked out, saying he needed some space. What's his real name? she continued.

—Patrick something, Vivian replied.

—Harrison Ford, I said dreamily, casually pulling out my stash.

—Yeah, well, you always have liked the older ones.

I just smiled. I used to have a thing for men in their forties. There were things I liked about being with these men in their forties: they'd lived so much more of life than I and had answers for most of my questions. But there were things I didn't like about being with these men in their forties: they'd lived so much more of life than I and had answers for most of my questions. I was aware of the pattern, but the reason for it was a puzzle to me. I asked the last one about it. His reply—along with the angry tone he delivered it in—cut me to the core: Could it be your chronic insecurity? Even though it was a question, it was the answer. There was nothing left for me to figure out.

Nowadays, I hang out with women my own age. My new friends and I are turning 33 this year. No one is ever 33 (except Jesus, but look what happened to him). How many times have you asked someone's age? And has the answer ever been 33? (Don't include former classmates because you assume they're the same age as you.) 32, 34, often 39. But never 33. It's a meaningless year. It's the year of transition from youth to middle age. No one wants to be 33.

What I like most about being with women my own age is that we talk things through, and we learn together. Some of us know more about certain things than others of us, but we don't give each other the answers. We powwow. We talk about everything from the big bang to The Big Bang.

—What's the matter with you? Vivian asked, pulling me out of my Harrison Ford and other older men reverie. You haven't made a smart remark in at least five minutes.

—I'm a dumb blond now. I have to practice.

I started sifting through the reefer, breaking up the buds. I picked up a magazine to catch the leaves as I rolled a joint.

—How 'bout Sean Connery? Amy cut in.

—I could say Jean Claude van Damme for the body, continued Vivian. But you know, if he talks, it's all over.

—Keep your hand over his mouth, I quipped, using the joint I'd just rolled to point the way to the balcony door.

—Do we need a towel to dry off the chairs? asked Betsy. It rained a little while ago.

—Nah. It's just a little water, maybe some dust.

—Yeah, I know what you mean. I don't even care if I'm dirty anymore.

—All these guys are old, said Betsy, brushing off a chair with her hand. Can they be any good?

—Ask her, the rest of them said, directing attention to me.

—Well, I don't have any recent experience with younger men—or older for that matter—but if memory serves, no difference. Some are good; some are bad.

I lit the joint.

—Do you think sex and love have anything to do with each other? Betsy asked.

We love her dearly, but god she asks a lot of questions. I passed the joint to Viv.

—Nope, I replied, keeping my answer as short as possible, waiting to exhale.

—Well, what's love then? Betsy persisted.

—A bunch of hooey, I coughed.

—No, really.

—Really, I said, finally letting go.

—I think love is just fear of death, Viv said, passing to Pippa, little puffs of smoke escaping with each word.

—Huh?

She had to let go to answer this one.

—Well, some people say that you feel love for someone because you want companionship to avoid the feeling of aloneness which is really fear of death because you realize you're real, and no one gets out alive.

—Maybe it's nesting hormones, Pippa offered with one eye closed to avoid the sting of smoke.

Pippa has bright red (we've never asked if it's natural, but it does suit her) hair. She's a retail manager and dates a woodworker who shows his stuff at craft fairs all over, so he's out of town a lot.

—Our brains get confused, she continued. And we twist it all up.

Pippa's not highly intellectual, but sometimes she surprises us with things she's read. She passed to Betsy. She was about to take a hit when Amy, who reads a lot of self-help books, gave us this long-winded, semi-philosophical explanation:

—In relationship books there's a trend towards believing that men and women are just different and the sooner we accept that, the sooner we'll be happy together. The theory goes on to say that men feel most loved when they are having sex and that women feel most loved when they are taken care of and that this is all hormonally generated.

—Betsy, smoke.

She brought the joint to her lips then paused again to listen to Viv.

—But if that's true, Viv said, then a married or attached man should never say that the sex he had with another woman means nothing. In fact, according to this theory, it means everything. By the same token, women shouldn't feel jealous and afraid of the sex their partners have with other women if their partners are "taking care" of them.

—Does that mean that there are or aren't soulmates? Betsy asked.

—We'll answer if you'll take a hit and pass the joint, said Pippa.

—I think of soulmates like I think of god, I said. It's a nice idea but not very realistic and certainly not practical. Why spend your whole life expecting something better? Make the best of what you have. Act like a fuckin' grownup.

Amy stood up quickly and walked into the house.

—Guess she thought her husband was her soulmate, I said sheepishly.

I always manage to say something to offend or embarrass Amy, but bless her, she doesn't seem to hold my bad timing against me. We all sat quietly for a while, letting the tension pass, mellowing into the high, giving me a chance to reflect on the irony of my having been the one to make the grown-up statement.

My first personal essay turned into a really bad short story in 1989. It was about the moment I grew up. The teacher who reviewed the story/essay was really kind: "This is good," he said. "But it's not great. And I still think it would be a better essay." He was 40. I had a secret thing for him. (Guess it's not much of a secret anymore.) The story/essay was triggered by an interview of some celebrity in some newspaper magazine. The celebrity gave some pat answer about how she realized she was grown up the first time she paid rent. It set me wondering about when I grew up. I thought back and discovered it was the first time I attempted to put forth a cohesive argument about politics in the Middle East. I was 16. And here I am, 17 years later, having spent most of the intervening years searching for a soulmate, not paying rent, and still attempting to put together cohesive arguments.

The screech of the screen door as Amy walked back out to the balcony brought us back to life.

—Are you afraid of death? Betsy asked anyone who was listening.

—I wonder about it, Amy said slowly, but I'm not sure I'm afraid of it. I don't let it keep me from doing the things I want to do.

—When you go skydiving, don't you think about what could happen?

—What's the point? If I do it then, I might as well do it every morning before I get out of bed. But if I did that and lived my life as if I might die, I'd end up in the looney bin.

—Or you'd commit suicide which kinda defeats the purpose of being afraid of death, doesn't it?

—Have you ever had an affair? Betsy asked Pippa.

Pippa hesitated, just long enough to give Vivian a chance to whisper,

—Once.

—You? Married-to-your-high-school-sweetheart Vivian?

—Best sex of my life. I was out-of-town taking a deposition. The guy who sat next to me on the plane was a SCUBA instructor. He was on his way back to San Diego.

—What was so good about it? I asked.

—Knowing it wouldn't become anything.

—No, we want a blow-by-blow account. They all looked at me askance. Yeah, yeah. Pun intended.

That was Amy's cue to go back inside. I was watching Viv. She had a bit of a frown on her face. She was thinking about something and looked disappointed in her own thoughts. I wondered if there was something more to the affair than she was letting on. I couldn't resist:

—So, Viv. When was it?

—A couple months ago.

—Hoser know about it?

—He really hates is when you call him that. If you're not gonna call him Jose, at least call him Joe.

—You're stalling.

—I don't know. It brought up some doubts.

—Is this fling—

—I don't know if I'd call him a fling.

—Would you call him a soulmate?

—He has surfboards on his wall. I can't see myself living with that the rest of my life, but the lightness of our time together made me wonder about whether I'm happy with Jose. We're good companions, probably even best friends. I can't imagine my life without him, but I just don't feel that spark of passion anymore.

Satisfied that I'd caused enough trouble, I suggested we go back in to watch the other movie. Amy was busying herself in the kitchen. When I saw their second choice, I got lost in a magazine for a while (Viv forbade me to bring a book). I looked up from it when I heard Pippa say that she has an eager beaver.

—All right, I said. Finally some details.

—It's worse than you think. That's the brand name of her vibrator.

—No way! You use a vibrator?

—Hey, he's gone half the time. What do you expect?

—You need Patrick what'shisname's bald head, Viv and I said together.

—What are you reading? (That was Betsy, of course.)

—The New Yorker.

—Hey! You weren't supposed to bring reading! Vivian exclaimed, snatching the magazine from me.

—I didn't. It's Amy's. Haha.

—You could have picked up the Vogue or Elle that we put out. Here, she said as she threw them at me.

—That Hollywood stuff we did earlier was about as much as I could take. Well, I added, tossing the Vogue back onto the coffee table, at least with Elle I can practice my French.

—You're impossible!

—How come you're always reading serious stuff? Betsy asked. Do you ever read anything we'd like?

I pointed at the tube.

—Considering you actually paid money to see this piece of shit in the theatre, I'd say no.

—Do you ever read normal books?

—You mean like your beloved Bridges? No.

—Why? Don't you like love stories?

—This isn't a love story. She got horny, fucked him, and tried to ameliorate her guilt by staying with the husband she didn't love. And if she had really been in love with the adventurous world-traveller, she'd have gone with him. And all this stuff about how she stayed because of her children is bullshit. She's as solipsistic as the rest of us.

—You seem to know a lot about it, Viv said, smiling because she thought she'd caught me. Are you a closet trash reader? she asked.

—Please. It's formula romance. Besides, how could anyone have missed all the fucking reviews?

—What do you guys think? asked Amy as she walked back into the living room. Is there such a thing as a soulmate?

—What a load of crap, I said.

—I think I agree, added Betsy. I could be happy with anyone.

—I'm not sure it's that easy. If you were with someone who was completely opposite, you'd never have any common ground. There has to be some ease. Besides, you're always complaining about Brad.

—Did I tell you about the latest thing he did?

—Is it any different from the other stuff?

—This time we were lying in bed at his place, and I didn't have a pillow. I said, I need a pillow. He kept reading the bikes and babes magazine he has a subscription to. So I said, I'm getting a headache; I need a pillow. He didn't answer, so I took his. Then he got up and got himself one.

—Which is what you should have done, Vivian told her.

—But I want him to take care of me.

—You need to take care of yourself, Amy corrected. Which answers the question: there's no such thing as a soulmate because if you learn to do things on your own, you wouldn't need anyone around to anticipate your needs. Then all you'd need 'em around for is the sex.

—Not if you have an Eager Beaver, said Pippa.

With that, Amy stood up and went back to the kitchen.

—So why do we bother with any of it? It all seems like such hard work.

—It's genetic, I said. Imagine that the primordial mass had consciousness, and when it exploded, it sent little bits of that consciousness out with every molecule. Those molecules eventually turned into the DNA we carry in our cells. There's no hope; we have a genetic longing to be whole, so we end up in relationship with men.

The screen went black as the movie ended. We all sat listening to the whir of the cassette rewinding. The click of the VCR heralded Amy's re-entrance into the living room.

—Who wants coffee? she asked, standing above us with a full pot, placing a covered platter on the coffee table. It's freshly ground, she added cheerfully.

—Mm, Vivian moaned as she took in the aroma. I wish someone would make a coffee air freshener.

—Amy, what do you have for munchies? I asked.

Smiling, she ripped off the foil.

—CHOCOLATE!