

# The List

by C. D. Peck

Agnes folded the magazine in her lap. It was one of those women's magazines that had a picture of a supermodel on the cover. The girl was pencil thin and not that attractive, at least not as far as Agnes was concerned, and she was surrounded by boldface words encouraging you to "Drive Him Wild", "Take a Sexy Survey", or learn "New Exciting Positions".

She sighed and glanced over at her husband. Morris was sitting in his chair watching television, his eyes glazed over, feet propped up on the ottoman. She tried to catch his eye, but he was completely drawn into his show. Some stupid show with cops and car chases. She couldn't understand why he watched trash like that.

"How can you read trash like that?" he asked, not diverting his attention from the television set.

"What?" she asked, raising her eyebrows. She had plucked her eyebrows and painted them on a little higher than they used to be so she always had a somewhat surprised look on her face. But when she really did raise her eyebrows they skyrocketed up to disappear behind her bottle red hair.

"Those magazines," Morris said. His eyes seemed dull and grey behind his bifocals. His hair had gone grey a long time ago, as if every trace of color was rinsed out of him. As a commercial came on, he finally turned his head to peer at her. "Why do you read them?"

"Why do you watch those shows?" she asked.

"Because they're interesting."

"Same reason."

"Bah," he retorted. "They're trash." He leaned over and swiped the periodical from off of her lap. "Look at these headlines. 'New Sex Secrets Revealed'. Sex secrets? Like we haven't figured it all out yet? Seriously, if there's anything new to sex, I ain't gonna be the one to try it out."

She rolled her eyes. "That's not surprising."

Morris's show came back on. She lost him again. She reached back over to get her magazine back, and he didn't even notice. She breathed another sigh of boredom and flipped the magazine open again, turning the pages loudly.

"We should try something," she said a few minutes later.

"What?"

"It says here that we should try a communication exercise..."

Morris snorted. "Communication exercise," he muttered under his breath.

"... where we each write a list of things that drive us crazy about each other."

"Number one," he said. "Women's magazines. Number two. Interrupting my t.v. show."

"Write it down."

He heaved a heavy sigh. "*Fine*."

Agnes got up and sauntered off to the kitchen. She returned with a notepad and two markers. She ripped off one sheet for herself and

handed him the notebook. By the time she was seated on the couch again, he had already started writing. She watched him for a second and then started her own list. She could only come up with a couple of things. The way he never pushed his chair in after he left the table. Farting in bed. Leaving his keys lying on the kitchen counter. Ignoring her when he watched television.

When she was finished, she set the paper and pen down on the coffee table. He was still writing. She waited, watching him. He kept writing. A moment passed and she thought that he was done, but he just turned the page and started writing on a new sheet.

"Okay... done," Morris said and smiled. "Now what?"

Somewhat agitated, Agnes picked the magazine back up. "Now it says we're supposed to guess what we have on each other's lists. You go first."

"This is a stupid game."

"Just go."

"Okay, okay. Farting."

"In bed, yes."

"Oh? I thought farting in general bothered you."

"Well it does," she said, "but when I'm in bed it's not like I can go away."

"That's true." He beamed a smile. "Okay, now you go."

"Hmmm..." She was thoughtful for several seconds, but she knew that if she didn't say something soon he'd disappear into his

television program yet again. "The way I always straighten up the sofa pillows before I sit down?"

"Ooh! Good one!" He started writing again.

"Hey! You're not supposed to write more!"

"Why not?"

"This isn't a competition! We're not keeping score here!"

"Can we?"

"No!"

"Well, then what's the point of playing?" he asked. Morris crumpled up his papers into a ball.

"Let me see that!"

"Why?"

"Just give it to me!" Agnes went to grab it out of his hand, but he tried to keep it from her. Eventually she ended up in his lap, but she got the paper from him. She smoothed it out. As she read through it, her face turned red.

"I can't believe you!" She read part of the list aloud. "Slurps her cereal? Hums along with commercial jingles? Makes weird faces when she sees a cute baby?"

"You do."

"I do not!"

"Yes," he said. "You do."

She kept reading. "Gets her right and her left confused but still wants to be a backseat driver? Arranges lunch meat geometrically when she's making a sandwich? Insists that the towels be folded a certain way?"

"Yep. Yep. Yep."

"Oh, my God. The way her face turns various shades of red when she's mad?"

"Like right now."

She growled and went back over to the couch, folded her arms, and sat down. He watched her for a moment and then shrugged and went back to his show. She sat in silence for a while, letting her anger fester, and then suddenly she retorted, "You chew too loud!"

"You make shadow puppets in the bathroom when you're taking a bath," he threw back.

"You leave the cupboard doors open!"

"You always have to hang your coat on the same hanger."

"You never put a new roll of toilet paper on the holder, you always just leave it on the sink!"

"Next to the curling iron that you always forget to unplug!"

"You leave your towels on the floor."

"You never lick the top of the mustard bottle before you put it away."

"You're not *supposed* to do that!"

"Well, it keeps it from getting all crusty."

She had no idea how to respond. Instead, she fell silent again. Angrily, she grabbed her magazine and pretended to read it, but she was too busy fuming.

"It was *your* quiz," Morris said under his breath.

"You always talk under your breath!"

"You always talk *over* your breath!" he said.

"What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?"

He shook his head.

"Are you saying that I talk loud?" she shouted.

He didn't say anything. He just turned up the volume on the t.v.

"That's what you're saying, isn't it?" she yelled.

Morris pointed at the list she was holding. She scanned down through it. He had written *Talks loud when she's mad*.

"I see how you are!"

Frustrated, she went back to her magazine. As she flipped through the pages, rustling the paper in an effort to annoy her husband, Agnes came across the article again. When she turned the page, she saw that there was a second part of the communication exercise.

"We should try this," she said.

"Oh, my God," Morris said, throwing his hands up in the air.

"No, this is good. We should do it. It's the second half of the communication exercise."

"Because the first half went so well," he said under his breath.

"We need to write down a list of things that we love about each other. Can you do that?"

He looked at her. And then he sighed. "Yeah, sure."

"Okay." She started writing her list, slowly at first, but then she gathered steam. She wrote about his sense of humor, his loyalty to her, his dependability, how he did all of the yard work, how he rubbed her back when she asked him to. By the time she'd finished with her list, she had two and a half pages of things that she loved about her husband.

When she looked up, she realized that he hadn't written anything. He sat on the chair, feet propped up, notebook on his lap, marker poised above the page. There was a look on his face as blank as his list.

Her heart sank at the sight of him.

And then she watched him slowly write three words on the paper. Long handwritten strokes, the tip of the marker rising and falling between each word. He paused to reread what he had written, and then put the cap back on the pen.

"What did you write?" she asked.

"Aren't we supposed to guess...?"

"Just tell me what you wrote." Her eyes were beginning to brim with tears. She felt so vulnerable sitting across from a man she'd been married to for thirty-six years, holding onto a long list of things that she loved about him. And he had only written one thing.

Morris hesitated as if reluctant to read it aloud. He looked down at the page, staring at those three words, and then he slowly folded the paper and handed it to her. She took it with trembling hands, blinking away her tears so that she could read what he had written. As she unfolded the page, and looked down, he watched her as more tears crept down her cheeks, falling from eyes that seemed strangely surprised by what she had read. Maybe it was just the eyebrows.

When she looked back up at him, she was smiling. He smiled back at her.

Agnes carefully placed the list on the coffee table, and then she went over to her husband and sat down on his lap. And they kissed like they had kissed thirty-six years ago.

On the coffee table, the list remained. Those three words were written in large black letters, and even though his eyes were dull and grey behind his bifocals and her eyes were blurry with tears, they could still read the words from across the room: *See other list.*

