

# The Book of Punishments

by Dawn Corrigan

## First Punishment

Beth and Ben rent *Bull Durham* one night. It's Beth's selection, her favorite movie. Usually at the rental place she just lets Ben choose--he's seen so many more movies than she has, and has such strong opinions about them. But this time Beth picks. The possibility of sharing something she loves with him, rather than the other way around, feels like a rare delicacy.

While they watch Beth sneaks occasional glances at Ben. He seems to laugh at the right places, though sometimes he looks a little bored, and once she catches him dozing. When the credits roll she turns to him expectantly.

"So?" she asks. "Did you like it?"

"Sure," Ben says, but Beth recognizes his diplomatic voice. "I liked it okay. Some parts more than others."

"Oh," Beth says. She cannot help looking crestfallen.

Ben laughs and takes her hand. "Hey, baby, don't worry about it. It's not like you *made* the movie. And I liked it, I really did. I think I just came at it wrong. I would have been perfectly satisfied if I'd just expected a funny Hollywood movie. I just thought it was supposed to be something a little ... more."

## Second Punishment

Ben takes Beth to the opening reception for a new exhibit of Barbara's work at the university gallery. The show is called "One."

Barbara is Ben's ex. They were still living together when Beth and Ben started seeing each other.

While Ben approaches Barbara for the congratulatory peck-and-chat, Beth reads Barbara's Artist's Statement, which is hanging near the gallery entrance.

In these photographs, I am concerned with questions of identity,

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both identity in relationship to the self and to various communities.

Late-twentieth-century Americans remain, like their forebears, preoccupied with notions of individuality. Yet they also increasingly

identify themselves as members of public groups: African-Americans, gays and lesbians, disabled veterans, Adult Children of Alcoholics.

Self-definition, then, occurs in many layers, so that, reversing the

nation's motto, "E pluribus unum," we might now say that "Out of one,

many" identities are constructed. This series examines these concerns

by focusing on unsettling images of "E pluribus unum" and "E unum plures."

Beth glances toward the spot where she last saw Ben and Barbara. They've moved over to the buffet table and are engaged in conversation with a distinguished older man, whom Beth recognizes as the chair of the art department.

While Beth watches, Barbara flings back her head to guffaw at something this man says. At the same time her hand reaches out and clutches Ben's arm.

### **Third Punishment**

Beth turns away and begins perusing Barbara's photographs. The first one shows a deformed banana. Or rather, two separate bananas that have grown together within one skin. The print is large--maybe three feet by five--and divided into four equal quadrants, like a 2 over 2 sash window.

In the upper left quadrant, the banana is shown intact, its skin a bright unblemished yellow. In the upper right quadrant, the banana has been peeled, revealing its twin fruits. Some brown spots have appeared on the skin. In the lower left corner, one of the fruits has

been removed. And in the lower right corner, the empty, speckled, unnaturally large peel lies in a heap.

After a moment, Beth moves on to the next item. This one shows a woman's foot. It's also fairly big--maybe three feet by three feet--so the foot appears larger than life-sized. The foot is daintily decorated--nails painted, draped with an anklet. The second and third digits of the foot are partially fused together, so the foot has only four nails to paint, one of them a double nail, reminiscent of the double banana.

Beth recognizes the foot. It belongs to Laurel, a graduate student in Ben's department. Once, after a department barbecue, Beth mentioned that Laurel's foot, which was usually clad in a toe-baring sandal, skeeved her out. Ben said he thought it was sexy.

Beth wonders how it came about that Barbara would photograph a foot belonging to a student in Ben's department.

She's still digesting this new information when a voice beside her says, practically in her ear, "Syndactyly."

"Huh?" says Beth, whipping her head around toward the voice.

"Fused digits," says the man who stands beside her. "I'm Steve," he adds, sticking out his hand. They shake. "Don't you work at the Florida Book Store?"

"I do," says Beth. "Have I sold you a book?"

"No," says Steve. "Actually, I work down at Chaucer's."

"Oh, the competition." Chaucer's is the most literary of the town's bookstores.

"Please don't hold it against me," says Steve. "So, what do you think?" He indicates the picture before them.

"I'm not here to think," says Beth. "I'm just trying to survive."

Steve regards her gravely. "Are you sure this is the best choice of venue, then? It seems like there might be other places more conducive to pure survival. More jungle-y, or something."

"No doubt," says Beth. "But the artist is my boyfriend's ex, so that makes this plenty treacherous."

"Why are you here, then?" Steve asks, raising an eyebrow. Beth shrugs hopelessly. "Now I'm more curious than even to hear what you think."

Beth sighs. "I'm still trying to reconcile 'E pluribus unum' with pictures of deformed fruit."

Steve laughs. "Better not say that too loud. They don't like that kind of plain talk in places like these."

"Not a fan?" Beth asks, feeling a sliver of happiness move through her. He furrows his brow. "Then what brings you here?"

"I'm here to pick up girls," Steve says simply. "Want to hit the buffet table? Want to run away to Mexico?"

Suddenly Ben is standing beside her. He has an unfailing knack for sensing when she's being flirted with. Somehow he's managed to wedge himself between Beth and Steve. Beth sees Steve's reaction, startled and bemused, out of her peripheral vision. Her forward vision is taken up by Ben, who, suddenly solicitous, has brought her a glass of wine.

"What do you think of the show?" Ben asks, handing over the wine and nuzzling Beth's hair. "Isn't it great?"

"It's something," Beth mutters. Instantly she feels the reaction of both men: Ben tense and withdrawn, Steve full of lively interest.

Ben's eyes drift over to Barbara, who stands amid a crowd of admirers. "I'm sorry the work doesn't engage you," Ben says, his voice filled with forced diplomacy. "I think if you'd try harder you'd find it very rewarding."

#### **Fourth Punishment**

There it is: the underhanded slight, the implication that Beth is not sophisticated enough. She can't believe admiring her predecessor's stupid pictures has become a requirement for her domestic happiness, but it has.

In fact, in anticipation of today, Ben tried to bring Beth up to speed the previous night after dinner, when he saw her frowning before one of Barbara's pictures in their living room.

"What?" he asked, challenging.

Beth flipped her hand toward the picture. "I don't get it."

Ben smiled. "I think you're looking for something that's not there."

Indeed, thought Beth. What might that be? Talent? Vision? Aloud she said, "Oh really. What is it I'm looking for?"

"Beauty," he said. "But contemporary art isn't about form. It's about content."

Convenient, Beth thought. Artists absolving themselves from aesthetic considerations. The picture she was looking at was a grainy shot of some vacant-eyed teenagers hanging out in front of the local mall. Beth was no expert, but she'd have to guess its "content" had something to do with the emptiness of consumerism. What, this is new?

But there was no talking to Ben about it--she could tell by his tone, and by the admiring look he bestowed on the picture. So she kept her mouth shut.

### **Fifth Punishment**

Beth's parents are planning a vacation in Orlando. Because her father is afraid to fly, they are driving down the coast from their home in New Jersey. They'll pass within 80 miles of Alachua, and their vacation coincides with Beth's birthday. Therefore, her mom suggests they stop in for the night. It will give them the chance to finally meet Ben. Her mom will cook Beth's favorite meal. Maybe Ben could even pick up a cake and some candles for a small after-dinner celebration.

"Sure, Mom, that sounds great," Beth says, though she's worried about how Ben will react. But when her mom makes the suggestion, it's still several months out from Beth's birthday, and Ben seems agreeable.

As her birthday approaches, Beth grows excited at the prospect of her parents' visit. She begins to look around the house with a critical eye, trying to envision how it will look to them. When she does, it becomes apparent that the house is still Ben's, not theirs together.

Whose fault is that? Beth wonders. Is Ben to blame? He hates change, and Beth has begun to suspect that besides substituting her for Barbara, he expects everything else to stay the same. On her most paranoid days, Beth feels certain this is why he seems to be

veering back toward Barbara: she's so much better at being herself than Beth can ever hope to be at imitating her.

Or is Beth herself at fault? She's spent so much time snooping around the house and then covering her tracks. It's like she's deliberately kept her presence minimal. Maybe if she makes the house more her own, she'll feel less alienated and stop picking fights with Ben.

Emboldened by this thinking, Beth removes one of Barbara's works from the living room wall and replaces it with a print of Paul Klee's "Cat and Bird." She replaces another of Barbara's pieces, this one in the kitchen, with an old black and white photo of her mother, grandmother, and aunt.

Beth is in the kitchen when Ben arrives home from school. "What's this?" he asks, stopping in front of Beth's photo.

"It's a picture of my mom," Beth says. "I thought I'd like to have some of my things up. I realized my parents are coming soon and I still act like your mistress, sneaking around this place. I figured I should stake some wall space of my own." Beth laughs nervously.

"Oh, sure," Ben murmurs.

But at breakfast the next morning he says, "I've been thinking. Maybe it's not such a good idea to have your parents here, this time around."

It's now a week before her parents' scheduled visit. Beth is stunned. "Are you saying I can't have my parents as guests in my own house?" she asks. Then she sees what's in Ben's face. "This isn't my house, is it? It's your house, and maybe Barbara's. I'm just a guest here, living on borrowed time."

Ben wipes his mustache with his napkin. "I've never even met your parents," he says. "Having strangers as houseguests is uncomfortable for me."

"Ben, you can't do this!" Beth cries. "My parents will be here in a week. This is so unfair. You're such a control freak--everything has to be your way all the time."

Ben folds his napkin into quarters. "You call me controlling, but if I only accommodate you, then aren't you the controlling one?"

Beth knows this logic is seriously flawed, but before she can rebut, Ben has risen and left the table. Helplessly, she picks up the phone and dials her parents' number.

### **Sixth Punishment**

Beth decides to go home for the holidays. After the fiasco on her birthday, she feels she and Ben need a break. Ben agrees so readily, however, that during the plane ride Beth begins to suspect that something is afoot. She sits in the cramped coach row, staring at the phone built into the seat in front of her, until she can take it no longer.

Her hand darts out and releases the phone. Jerkily she dials the number, trying to think of what she'll say when Ben answers. But there is no reason for this concern, since he doesn't pick up.

By the time the plane lands, Beth is frantic. She can hardly contain herself enough to greet her mother.

"What's wrong?" her mom asks sharply, releasing her from their hug.

"Nothing, Mom," Beth says. "Everything's fine. I'm just tired."

When they arrive at her parents' house, she kisses her father and brother, then carries her bag to her childhood room.

She sits on the bed staring at the phone. Her hand darts out and snatches the receiver. She dials. No answer.

"I made eggplant parmigiana," her mom says, breezing through the door. She stops in her tracks at the sight of Beth's face.

"Bethany, what is going on?"

"Nothing, Mom."

"Is he being mean to you?"

"It's not like that. We've just been having ... issues."

"Issues my ass. I can see you're unhappy."

"I'm fine. We just had a little fight before I left, is all. I should probably call him and clear the air. Then I'll be able to relax." Beth forces a smile. Her mother backs out of the room, squinting suspiciously.

Beth dials Ben's number again. There's still no answer. Then she dials a different number. This time a woman picks up.

"May I speak to Ben please?"

There's a long pause. Then, "Just a minute," the woman says.

After another long pause Ben comes to the phone. "Yes?"

"What the hell are you doing there?"

"I'm having dinner," Ben answers. He says nothing else. For a long time Beth listens to his silence, which is punctuated only by the soft regular sounds of his chewing. He chews and chews. Beth does not scream.

### **Final Punishment**

When it's finally over, Beth retreats to her parents' house. After she's been there a week, a package from Ben arrives. It includes the story he'd been working on before she left. Couched in Greek mythology, it tells of a man who is betrayed by everything, even his own body, which collapses underneath him when he's out in the forest on a hunt. It's also a story of failed love, and, though the male protagonist is finally forced to end the unhappy relationship, it's made clear he is the one who suffers most from this decision.

The final scene occurs at a feast. Ben describes the scene in exquisite detail, paying careful attention to the outfit worn by the heroine. As she reads, Beth abruptly realizes Ben is describing the dress she'd worn to his department Christmas party the previous year.

Beth is aghast. What is she supposed to do with this story, which exonerates Ben and accuses her, and insults her clothing to boot? Belatedly, she turns to the letter Ben included with the story.

*I would appreciate any comment you might have, Ben wrote, but I fear you'll read more into this than what's there.*

*But it is, after all, only a story.*

