

Cheat Sheets

by Julie Britt

I decided to cheat on my husband the day the washing machine broke.

It was Darrell's fault, anyway. If he hadn't tried to wash the dog in the Maytag, none of this would've happened. It just goes to show that a man who forsakes the normal use of a household appliance should expect his life to turn into a Hank Williams song. Senior, not junior. Can't that boy write a song that doesn't remind us of who his daddy was? Like we could ever forget? I mean, get over it.

Anyway, I discovered the washer full of dog hair at the exact moment I dropped my lingerie bag into the vileness. Thank goodness General Lee is a bird dog of the short-hair variety; if he was a setter that machine would've been hopeless, and I'd have called the beer-gutted Goodwill driver instead of the hunkelicious Maytag man.

Now I know what you're gonna say: If I'd just handwashed my delicates the way my Mama, rest her soul, taught me to, my cherry-red Victoria's Secret push-up bra (not that I need it, but it was on sale) and my vixen black stretch lace teddy wouldn't have been utterly ruined by the residue that's created when muddy bird dog is combined with lukewarm water, Tide (Darrell thought it'd clean General Lee up whiter than Squeaky Dog shampoo), and Springtime Bouquet fabric softener (Darrell thought it would make the mutt smell better; well, he was probably right about that). At least he left out the Clorox. He's so doggone proud of General Lee's liver spots that he'd have had a conniption fit right there in the laundry room if they'd been lightened to lemon.

Now I have to stop right here and tell you three things about myself:

(1) I'm a fair and patient woman who wouldn't hurt a flea on General Lee's mangy butt.

(2) Knowing I'm wearing my dainty underthings under my ugly baby-poop green polyester Hamburger Heaven uniform has gotten me through many a night of soaking up fry grease with my porcelain complexion and having fat old men say, "No, but I sure would like to put you in a sack and take you home" when I ask if they want fries with that.

And (3) Martha Stewart would be proud to eat off of the Southwest Sunset linoleum on my laundry room floor. Heck, she'd be thrilled to slurp consomme right out of the heavy-duty large-capacity silent-spin tub of that Maytag.

You know, I made consomme once. I ask you, what's the point? It don't add one iota of color to your holiday table, and it don't taste nearly as good as regular old pot likker that you've sopped your corn bread in. And what's that gazpacho all about? I like my soup tongue-blistering hot, brimming with healthy vegetables swimming in beef broth that just sparkles with the hot grease floating on top.

But I got off track. Oh, yeah. Speaking of tongue-blistering, I was gonna tell you how I came to know my Maytag man in what you call the biblical sense. Now, before all this bathing General Lee nonsense, I had been the kind of girl who would've never cheated on Darrell. And if I had, which I didn't, I would've gotten to know the guy in a more, well, Sunday dinner sense first.

But the order of things went like this:

First, I got real pissed at Darrell for stuffing a filthy old dog that don't know a quail from an ostrich into my sparkling almond cream washer.

Then Darrell was (can you believe this?) a whole lot more concerned with helping General Lee get over the trauma of nearly being presoaked to death than helping me pluck dog hair from my cleavage-enhancing undies. And what kind of name is that for a hunting dog anyway? We lost. The old gray-haired general and the gray horse he hightailed it back to Virginia on are dead and buried. Move on, people.

Next, Darrell, (wisely for once) packed up the terrified wet dog in his truck and headed for his brother's hunting cabin in the river. It is actually in the river, Darrell and Joey built it on stilts right there in the water. They'd wanted a houseboat but couldn't figure out how to make it float.

Last, but far from least, Mikey the Maytag man appeared on my doorstep in thigh-hugging Levis, cowboy boots, and a black T-shirt that was pulled so tight across those chest muscles that I know it would've flown around the room backward if I'd stuck a pin in it.

It was at that simultaneous instant I figured out how I would punish Darrell for so wantonly disregarding my need for sexy lingerie that don't smell like it's been wallowing on a dead cat in a swamp.

"Ma'am, I unnerstand you got a problem with your machine? I'm Mike Carter? The service center sent me?"

"Why, yes. I'm Charlene Fields, and I did report a problem with my washer, but I'm a little embarrassed to explain it now that you're here in person and all." I tried to act weak and needy, looking up at Mike through my thick, curly lashes.

"Well, ma'am, I 'spect there's not a washer problem that I haven't seen in my five years on the job. You got your basics, like the tub was spunned out of whack. Then there's your weak and worn belts

and hoses, or your breakdown of essential power supply connection. Ma'am, did you make sure it was plugged in?"

Maybe I shouldn't act too dumb with this guy.

"It's definitely plugged in—Mike, did you say? Yes, well, it's not my fault at all, you see. My hus—that is, you might say ex-husband, Darrell, basically clogged up the works with General Lee and what anyone would call an excessive amount of Tide? Well, you can see how that would ruin a woman's day, especially since it prevented me from washing my various Victoria's Secret items."

"General Lee, ma'am?"

This was taking entirely too long.

"Come into the laundry annex, Mike, and you can see for yourself."

Mike took one look at the swampified machine and started chuckling.

"I'd say by the looks of things that General Lee is a German short-haired pointer, liver and white in color, with untrimmed toenails. I'd guess the General had been down in Ray Purcell's woods, on the south side, near the creek. I'd also venture to guess that the old General was about as pis—scuse me, ma'am, mad as a hound can get without having his tail set fire or tied to a cat. And I'd say Darrell won't be sleeping at home tonight."

I guess guys can play dumb, too.

"Mikey, you've hit the nail on the head. I tell you, I was livid with anger and all when I saw what Darrell and that dog had done to my Maytag."

"I wouldn't blame the dog much, ma'am. He probably didn't want to be in that machine any more than you wanted him there. Dogs are man's best friend, after all, and it's up to us to...."

Oh, for Pete's sake.

"Mike, look at this," I said, holding up my formerly red bra.

"Did Darrell put that on General Lee?" Mike asked, fuming.

I could tell he was one step away from calling the YMCA to report cruelty to a smelly old dog.

"Mike, this," I said, shaking the slimy undergarment, "is supposed to look like this." I lifted my genuine Gloria Vanderbilt T-shirt to reveal a cleaner version of the destroyed undie. I saw immediately that the sheer pouty pink lace delight got Mike's attention at last. General Lee was definitely out of the picture from that moment on. Life's just too doggone short to be subtle.

I dropped the contaminated bra, moved closer to the stunned repairman, and whispered, "Mikey, honey, I'm just so upset I don't know what I'm gonna do. I don't care about that silly old machine so much. It's just that I was going to wear that red bra tonight and show Darrell the time of his life. Melrose Place is a rerun, there ain't no ball games on TV, and I got a new coupon from Pizza Factory. I was going to order in and make Darrell feel like a real man. But he spoiled it all. Now my bra is ruined, Darrell's run off to the woods with the dog, and I'm all alone in this big old house. I was just trying to meet his manly needs, and look at the thanks I get. Now what on earth should I do?"

"Well, uhhm, ah, I, ah, you could....Well."

Mike sputtered a bit, staring wide-eyed at my perky bosoms. I had him right in the palm of my dainty hand. Well, not yet, but I knew where we were headed. Since his eyes were glued to my taut flesh, I took a second to put a light sheen on my full lips with my tongue. There. I was ready.

“Scuse me, ma'am,” Mike said, shifting his gaze somewhere above my head. “What I was saying was, what you could do, since you're in desperate need—of your washer, that is—I could get a temporary replacement model sent over right away. You could be doing your laundry in a jiffy. I could just haul this out to the driveway and hose 'er off. Then I'd make some precise adjustments in the plumbing, jiggle your knobs a couple times to see if they're nice and tight, then I could haul 'er back in and make all of the necessary connections in time for you to go at it again. Your second load, that is.”

Lord, men love their gadgets and machines nearly 'bout as much as they love their flea-bitten mutts.

“Oh, Mike, I don't know if a replacement model is necessary, since you're here and all. I mean, I guess I don't really need to wash my fine unmentionables now that Darrell's gone. And I do have this set,” I said, poking my chest at him a little more and tugging at the waistband of my jeans, hoping he'd realize I was signaling that I was wearing the matching French-cut bikinis.

“OK, ma'am. I'll just get to humping on your unit here and we'll have her good as new in no time.”

“Take your time,” I said, pulling my shirt down and wiping my lips with the back of my hand. I was a little miffed and pissed at first, but then I remembered my grandma always said, “There's more than one way to skin a cat.” Maybe that means there's more than one way to peel a shirt off a man's back and get your most intimate needs handled.

I left Mike to his labor for a while. I didn't expect it would be too sexy to watch him sloshing around in that dog goo. Besides, I had to come up with Plan B, now that Plan Full Frontal Assault had backfired.

"I am woman, hear me roar," I said when I got to my bedroom upstairs. Looking in the mirror at myself with my shirt pulled up to my ears, I realized my charms were not lacking. No, that had not been the problem. But like most men, at least the ones I had the pleasure to, well, meet, Mike was more dedicated to his blessed career than to the pursuit of love and happiness.

Well, no matter. Darrell was like that when we met, but I changed that in a hurry. In no time at all I had him staying home with me on Saturdays instead of going to work. And everything was hunky dory and wonderful until his daddy's bitch, Raquel, had that litter of prize bird puppies. I knew things had changed as soon as Darrell brought that dog home and the little general commenced to peeing right on my no-wax floor.

"Looky there, ain't that something?" Darrell had exclaimed.

I looked at his freckled face, which was covered in the goofiest grin I ever had seen, and knew that here was trouble with a capital D.

I have to admit the little fella was cute at first. He was furry and freckled, tripping over his own big feet. He reminded me a lot of the way Darrell was when I met him in high school. Before he got more suave and cool and stuff.

General Lee would curl up between us on the couch of a Sunday evening while we were watching "America's Funniest Videos." We'd laugh to beat the band when somebody's pants fell down or their hairpiece fell into a punch bowl. And General Lee would look at both

of us with that silly puppy grin, then he'd go to yipping and yapping, spraying puppy breath all over my Great-Grandma Irene's Lord's Prayer afghan. It seemed like every time that pup'd do something cute and cuddly, he'd follow it right up with something gross and smelly.

By the time the rest of him had grown up to match his feet, I was ready to put him and Darrell in the doghouse. Darrell was convinced that the way to make a good hunting dog was to let it hang around with you all the time so it would know you and respect you and such. He'd read that in some book in elementary school. I pointed out to him that the dog in that story had ended up foaming at the mouth with a bullet in his head, but that didn't sway Darrell from keeping General Lee underfoot at all times.

When hunting season started, Darrell could barely sleep at night. He was so excited about the chance to go tramping through the woods and snakes and all with that mutt that he was a real live wire all the time. That would've been all right if he'd used some of that extra energy to give me some real love, the kind I got every night before General Lee moved in.

Well, every night except when there was an ABC basketball game on TV. I used to pray that Dean Smith and Mike Whosewhatsit and that Italian man who died, bless his heart, wouldn't make it past the Holy 64 or whatever in that tournament. There was many a time the Heels or the Devils or the Cinderellas and what-have-you would go just about all the way, which put a dent in my love life to pretty near Easter.

And one year Darrell said he was thinking of giving up making love for Lent. Yeah, right. I pointed out to him right quick that Baptists don't even pay attention to the time leading up to Easter. It's the aftermath that counts. That was a close one. I guess I would've just

found me a spare man a lot sooner if Darrell'd suddenly decided to become a Methodist or Protestant or something.

But my point is, can't you see how I was nearly at the end of my straw by the time Darrell dunked the dog? I mean, I'm a patient woman who loves her man and all men, for that matter, but enough is enough. It was bad enough that Darrell'd ruined the Maytag. But to ruin my delicates and then leave with the dog without a kiss goodbye? Well, I never.

But I was about to. I heard Mike stomping and banging around downstairs. I figured it'd take him at least an hour to get the Maytag in working order, what with the \$45-an-hour charge and all. So I had plenty of time to plan my next move.

I stripped down to my unmentionables, took a quick whiff under my arms, then decided a shower was called for. I used my Body Silk skin-removing scrub, then washed my hair in Pantene, the one especially for curly permed hair. I took special care with my makeup, making sure I highlighted all the right spots, including my cleavage and belly button. A little Oh De Perfume and some lotion on my elbows and I was ready.

"Oh, Mikey," I cooed, walking down the stairs in my pink satin robe and matching mules with genuine faux mink trim. "Is my machine ready?"

"Yes, ma'am. I've just finished squeezing the hoses and lubing the belts. It seems to be in good shape, considering."

I couldn't help but notice the look in Mikey's eyes when I strolled casually into the room. I tried to move like Amanda on Melrose Place when she was closing in for the kill. It didn't seem to matter though, because Mikey was just looking at my shining cleavage and my pouty lips.

“Uh, ma'am, do you have some clothes we can put in here to test the machine?” he asked, wiping the sweat from his face with a bandanna he'd pulled from his oh-so-snug jeans.

“Oh, I guess the hamper is still in the bathroom, Mikey. And it's so hard for me to walk up those stairs in these shoes. Perhaps you could fetch it...”

He seemed to consider that idea for a second, then his handsome face lit up. “Here you go, ma'am,” he said, pulling his T-shirt off in one sexy move. “Try this. That way, if I didn't fix 'er just right, you won't ruin any more of your finery.”

“Uh, yes, oh my goodness,” I said, not too sophisticatedly, I must admit. It's just that the sight of Mikey's bare chest and tummy made my own tummy turn a few flips. His arms were big and hairy, just the way I like them, although I couldn't help but notice that there was some of the dreaded dog goo in the crease of his elbow. I forced myself to look up at his face, which was oh so darling, especially the way his hair stood up in front where that tight shirt had raked it.

“I have a marvelous idea, Mikey. Why don't we wash all of your things, then we'll know for sure if the machine is working. And you can take a quick shower upstairs while the Maytag is doing its thing.”

Mikey blushed, which just made my heart melt into a little puddle.

“Okay, ma'am, if you'd just turn...”

“Just drop your things in the washer and turn me, I mean, it on. I'll just go start a bath for us, I mean, you.”

“Right. Now you be careful going up the stairs, ma'am.”

By the time Mikey joined me upstairs, I had the bathroom all steamy and smelling good. I politely let him have his privacy in the shower while I wondered exactly how I was going to move things along. No problem. In a minute or two, Mikey called out, "Ma'am, could you do my back?"

I did. And a few other things. Then he showed me a thing or two. For a man, Mikey was pretty good in bed. Paid attention to me and all. Talked to me, asked me if I liked it, then made sure I did.

For a second I realized we were sinning right on the sheets that Darrell's mom had given us for Christmas, but Mikey's tongue distracted me from that little twinge of guilt real quick like. Then I was lost in his manly arms and the aroma of real man sweat and a faint whiff of Tide.

About the time we reached the point of no return, I heard a loud thumping and bumping downstairs that seemed to match the rhythm of the squeaking bed.

"The earth is moving, just like in that...."

"Book about the soldier?"

"No, like when Amanda stole somebody's husband. I don't remember. Oh, good gracious."

It wasn't until afterward, when I was wishing I smoked, since it seemed to be the perfect moment for a cigarette, that I realized the racket I'd heard was the Maytag bucking across the floor downstairs.

"Aha," Mikey cried, jumping up and heading for the door, nekkid as he could be. "It's spunned out of whack. I can fix that."

So much for a second one, I thought. Then I realized the phone was ringing.

"Charlene? It's Darrell. You still mad?"

"Darrell? Where are you?"

"I'm still at the houseboat, I mean river house. Baby, can I come home?"

"Right now?"

"Yeah. But just me. I'm going to leave General Lee with Joey for a while. The woods is a good place for a dog. Give us a chance to be alone. Okay."

"Oh. Okay. I...okay. But don't rush now. Drive careful."

"I will, honey. See you in a little bit."

I jumped up and snatched the sheets from the bed, sort of wrapped them around me and ran downstairs, nearly tripping myself on a stray pillowcase.

"Mike. Time to go," I said, out of breath.

He was staring into the Maytag, hands on his bare hips. Whew.

"Here." I handed him his wet clothes from the depths of my machine.

"They ain't spunned dry. I can fix it though."

"No. Can't. Gotta leave."

“Darrell...?”

“Yep.”

“Bye, then. Don't worry about the bill. If you want me to come back to finish...never mind. Bye.”

Mikey squeezed himself into those sopping jeans and headed for his truck.

I watched him leave and then I stuffed Darrell's mother's sheets into the Maytag.

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