

The Singular Exploits of Wonder Mom and Party Girl (Excerpt)

by Marc Schuster

The mail arrived while I was on the phone with Roger.

"Is it a date?" he asked.

"Not that it's any of your business, but no."

Catherine and Lily were doing their homework at the kitchen table, so I was careful not to say the word date out loud. Meeting, yes. Rescheduled, certainly. Friday night, mostly harmless. But a word like date, with the questions it begged and the baggage it carried, was better left unspoken.

"Friday night? Dinner? His treat, I'm guessing? Sounds like a date to me."

"I didn't call to get your opinion," I said. "I called so you'd come for the girls on time."

"Are you kidding? I always come for the girls on time."

"You frequently come for the girls on time," I said as the mailman cut across my front lawn with a brown paper package in his hand.

"And occasionally you make them wait for an hour."

"Okay," Roger said. "I'll send Chloe."

"Don't," I said.

"It isn't a problem. She doesn't mind at all."

"She's not the one I'm worried about."

There was a knock at the door, and Catherine looked up from her math homework. Her books were all open and stacked in front of her, the spine of each resting neatly in the crease of the one below. The glance that passed between us said she'd rather not be bothered by petty concerns like accepting deliveries from the mailman or the logistics of moving between one parent and another, but Lily was more than eager to leap from the drudgery of her

phonics workbook to whatever adventure lay between the kitchen and the front door. When her wide emerald eyes asked for permission to leave the table, I nodded, adding in the unspoken language of mothers and daughters that she better make it quick.

"So what do you know about this guy?" Roger asked as Lily returned with the spoils of her short but triumphant journey. "Where does he live? What does he do? What kind of car does he drive?"

"I don't know," I said. "And it doesn't matter because this isn't what you think it is."

Lily showed me the package. It was addressed in my mother's letter-perfect script. Since the divorce, she'd been sending me self-help books like clockwork, so it wasn't a stretch for me to assume that this was one more in a long list of titles selected, above all, to remind me that my marriage had failed: *Surviving Divorce*, *Divorce and the Working Mother*, *The Spirituality of Divorce*, *Divorce for Beginners*, *Divorcing for Good*, and my personal favorite, *Divorced and Loving It: The New You Guide to Life without Him*. Sure, they were trite and completely unreadable, but who was I to deny my daughter the joy of opening a brown paper package sent with uncompromising love from her grandmother in Maryland?

"Can I?" Lily asked.

I gave her a nod. She tore at the package with greedy fingers. As the paper fell away to reveal yet another self-help volume, Lily cocked her head in a gesture of confusion and curiosity. Following her gaze to the lipstick-red letters that spelled out the book's title, I took in a sharp breath and told Roger that I had to go.

"What is it, Mom?" Lily asked as I reached out to revoke her prize.

"Nothing," I said. "Grandma made a mistake."

"Oh," Lily said. "What's master... master?"

"God," Catherine groaned, looking up from her homework once again as Lily sounded out the one word I didn't want her to see.

"It's nothing," I said. "It's an adult topic."

"Does it have to do with divorce?" Lily asked as Catherine covered her ears.

"No," I said. "Yes. A little bit. It's a mistake is all. We'll talk about it

later.”

“Is it sex?”

“I’m leaving,” Catherine said. “I’m gathering my books, and I’m walking out of the room.”

“It’s sex, isn’t it?” Lily said as Catherine broke into a mortified run. “You can tell me if it is. I know all about sex.”

“You’re seven,” I said.

“I’m very mature for my age.”

I blamed television. I blamed the internet. I blamed the world we live in.

Most of all, I blamed myself.

The book in question was called *Singular Pleasures: The Womanly Art of Masturbation*, and when I called my mother to ask if she’d lost her mind, she explained in measured, even tones that masturbation was a perfectly natural option for a woman in my position to consider.

“My position?” I asked.

“Divorced,” my mother said. In addition to plying me with self-help books, she had a habit of sending me newspaper clippings chronicling the accomplishments of boys I’d known in grade school. Andy Gumble, who used to eat paste, was a gynecologist now. Chucky Friel, who once stole a case of beer from our neighbor’s garage, was a district councilman. Danny Brooks, who was suspended for setting off firecrackers in the gym, was opening a pretzel franchise in Havre de Grace. *Single?* my mother asked on a three-by-five index card stapled to this last item, her query already pregnant with disappointment. “I assume you’re still not seeing anyone.”

“No, Mom, but I don’t think I have to resort to that.”

“Masturbation?” my mother said. “It’s just a word, Audrey. You don’t have to be afraid of it.”

“I’m not,” I said.

“Then say it with me. Masturbation.”

“I’m not having this conversation.”

“Women have certain needs,” my mother insisted. “And believe me,

we don't need men to fulfill them. Take your father and me, for instance."

"Mom, could you please stop talking?"

"Let's just say he's not the man he used to be."

"I'm hanging up now, Mom. Goodbye."

My mother started to elaborate upon my father's sexual dysfunctions, and I broke the connection between us. If I had time, I'd call back and apologize, but there was dinner to make, and Lily was still brooding over my refusal to discuss a certain singular topic with her.

"Are you ever going to get married again?" she asked later that night as I put a plate of mushy ravioli in front of her. "Because dad says you're the kind of woman who doesn't need a man."

"He said that?" I asked.

"He was just kidding," Catherine assured me, refusing to make eye contact as she poked at her dinner. Magnets held last year's tests and report cards to the refrigerator. Before the divorce, she'd been a solid B student. Now all she did was study, and her grades were nearly perfect. I worried that she was trying too hard to please. I worried that she was trying to earn my love. "He says a lot of things he doesn't mean."

"But Chloe says everybody needs somebody," Lily said, picking up where she left off. "She says all you need is a little makeover, and guys'll go wild for you."

"Shut up," Catherine said through gritted teeth.

"Mom, what's liposuction?"

Catherine kicked Lily under the table, and Lily let out a yelp. When the telephone rang, I assumed it was my mother and let the machine deal with her. All I knew as her voice crackled over the line and my daughters started pecking at each other was that if something didn't change soon, the only pleasures I'd ever know again—sexual or otherwise—would likely be of the singular variety.

