

# Better than Ever

*by* Michael Boylan

Jeremy Holderman opened his eyes and knew instantly that it was going to be a great day. He could feel it with every fiber of his being. His toes started tapping before he got out of bed.

Judging by the amount of light filtering into his bedroom, he could tell that it was going to be a warm outside and that his wife, Carol, had let him sleep in. I must have needed it too, thought Jeremy, because I really feel terrific today.

Jeremy walked over to the bathroom with a spring in his step, turned on the shower and started whistling as he waited for the water to warm up. He looked out at the back yard and watched a pair of squirrels chase each other around the patio and on to the picket fence in the back. The smile that Jeremy woke up with grew even bigger watching their hi-jinks, but the water was the right temperature and Jeremy wanted to hurry up and get downstairs for a nice, big breakfast.

The water felt amazing pulsating against his skin and Jeremy continued to whistle as he lathered up a large loofah with some very aromatic body wash. It was all quite refreshing and soon enough, Jeremy was toweling off with his large, soft, monogrammed towel. He glanced out the window to see if the squirrels were still scampering about and instead saw two cardinals swoop in and settle on the bird bath.

Nature is awesome, thought Jeremy. He went over to the closet, found his most comfortable pair of jeans and his favorite t-shirt. It was the album cover of The Smith's "Meat is Murder" album. He didn't necessarily agree with the sentiment, but he liked the shirt.

As he put on his pants he noted that they were a little loose on him. I guess I've lost a little weight, too, Jeremy noted, deciding that he could afford an extra pancake or two today if he wanted.

He went downstairs, jogging jauntily, and he could hear some music playing. It was Vampire Weekend, his wife's favorite. Jeremy could see her wiping down the counter in the kitchen.

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“Good morning,” he called out. He must have startled Carol because she tensed up and looked at the stairs as if she was seeing a ghost. Her face instantly relaxed into a smile that tried, but failed, to match the size of Jeremy's.

“Good morning, honey,” she said.

Jeremy padded over to the kitchen and walked up behind his wife. He embraced her, leaning in to kiss her neck. He could feel her relax, the tension leaving her shoulders and falling towards the floor. She sighed and turned her head to give him a quick kiss.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Famished,” Jeremy stated. “I was going to make pancakes and bacon, if it won't mess up the kitchen too much.”

“Counters can always be wiped down again,” Carol said agreeably.

“Do you want me to make them?”

“Not at all,” said Jeremy. “You just make the coffee.”

Soon, the kitchen was a symphony of sounds and delightful aromas. Jeremy intently listened to the bacon sizzle in the small pan, while he was flipping pancake after pancake with considerable skill on the griddle. Carol entered the kitchen, handing Jeremy a cup of steaming coffee and looking at him with sentimental eyes that told him just how much she loved him and how happy she was this morning too. She spooned against him and rubbed his neck briefly. Jeremy grew firm thinking that there was a chance for some brunch-time lovemaking if he played his cards right. And on a day like this, Jeremy had a sense that he could draw full houses all day long.

At breakfast, Jeremy consumed more pancakes than he could ever remember. He had made dozens of silver dollar size pancakes and was dipping them briefly in a puddle of syrup and then eating them in one bite. When they were gone, he ran several strips of bacon through the remaining bit of syrup and wolfed them down as well. He glanced at his wife and saw that she was watching him with what appeared to be morbid fascination.

“What's the matter, little lady, never seen a man eat before?” Jeremy drawled with a chuckle.

“I - uh, I've just never seen you eat like this before,” Carol said.

Jeremy noticed that she did look rather shocked at the whole affair. Jeremy felt fit and healthy so he wasn't worried about eating too many calories in one sitting.

"Let's go out and walk off breakfast," Jeremy offered, dying to get outside and enjoy the glorious day that awaited him.

"No," Carol snapped, looking horrified for a moment, before masking it beneath a forced smile. Jeremy's eyes narrowed as he looked at his wife, thinking that she was acting kind of strange.

"Are you alright, Carol?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, laughing a little and shaking her head. "I just. I was hoping you'd come back to bed with me instead."

Jeremy smirked and raised an eyebrow.

"I thought you'd never ask," he said. He stood up from his chair and strutted over to Carol. He took her hand, which trembled a little, and helped her to her feet. Jeremy made a move to sweep her off her feet and carry her upstairs.

"No," Carol said. "That's dangerous. I don't want you to fall," she said.

"You're not heavy, honey," Jeremy said, and it was true. She wasn't. Carol was a petite woman who barely weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet. Jeremy was very tall, a former bench player for his college basketball team, and Carol stood just over five feet tall. Early in their relationship, he joked that Carol was his little hobbit. She had not cared for that joke, so it had been retired. "Besides," Jeremy added. "I feel as strong as an ox today."

"Well, you can prove it in bed," Carol said, turning away from him and walking up the stairs. Later, if you asked him, Jeremy would have said that Carol sounded kind of grim when she said that. At the moment though, the thought of sex clouded everything and made Jeremy feel like the birds outside were singing just for him.

Jeremy slung his clothes off quickly and jumped into the bed. Carol's eyes followed him and widened at his rapid movement in the room. It was almost as if she hadn't seen him behave like this every day. Oh well, Jeremy thought, it figures that when I am feeling the best I have in as long as I can remember, she is just having a regular day.

He vowed to make their lovemaking extra special. Carol was beautiful and the sun cascading through the windows gave her a glow that Jeremy wanted to remember for the rest of his life. She was still slowly peeling off her clothes and gently laying them on her dresser, while Jeremy looked on. He reached out his hand and softly stroked her back, not noticing her recoil slightly at his touch. He placed his hand on her shoulder and rolled her towards him, leaning down to kiss her. She closed her eyes, as she always did, and Jeremy planted a tender kiss on her lips before moving down and kissing her chin, neck and chest. As he continued to make his way down, Carol bit her lip and started to quietly sob. When Jeremy rose up towards her head again, Carol had got control of herself and now looked at her husband with dewy eyes that he saw as proof of his proficiency.

"I love you, honey," he said, just above a whisper.

"I love you too," she answered, in a voice that was just as quiet.

Jeremy got above her and was about to penetrate her, when Carol rolled off the bed and ran into the bathroom. She slammed the door and started the shower.

"Carol?" Jeremy asked. "Are you O.K.?"

Under the sound of the shower, Jeremy thought he could hear Carol retching. He got out of the bed and stood at the bathroom door.

"Honey?" he asked, knocking on the door.

"D-don't come in," Carol said, retching once more. Jeremy could hear her vomit splash into the bowl. He backed away from the door, knowing that if he heard much more he would be sick himself. Is it something I did, Jeremy wondered, replaying the last few minutes in his head. He thought it was typical of most of the sex they had in their eleven years of marriage. Jeremy had showered that morning, so he couldn't smell bad, and his breath would smell more like pancakes and bacon than anything else. He shook his head as he pondered it some more, before shrugging his shoulders and sitting back down on the bed.

Carol was no longer making those dreadful heaving sounds, so Jeremy figured that she had entered the shower. He wondered what

could be wrong with her and decided that this was just one of those days that served as an example of how mysterious women could be. Jeremy, obviously no longer in the mood for sex, put his clothes back on and decided he would go for that walk.

As he opened the door on the world outside, he found that it was just as transcendent as everything else had seemed to him that morning. It was a beautiful spring day and Jeremy was bursting with joy at being alive. He stood outside on the porch for a few minutes, listening to the drone of several bees buzzing around their blooming lilac bush. Jeremy caught a taste of their sweet smell on the warm breeze as he made his way down the steps and towards the driveway.

Everything looked good to Jeremy, from his lush green lawn that was neatly manicured, to the dogwood trees in his neighbor's yard.

Jeremy and Carol had lived next door to Frank Crane for five years and each year, Crane would bring over some branches for Carol to put in vases around the house. Jeremy decided to walk in the direction of Crane's house and see if he was out puttering around his garden. Crane was an elderly widow and the best neighbor Jeremy and Carol had ever had. He watered their plants and took in their mail when they went on their vacations each year and always invited them over for some lemonade and homemade cookies on hot summer days. Jeremy saw Crane tending to some tomato plants in his vegetable garden in the back corner of his yard.

"Frank," Jeremy called out. "How's it going?"

It appeared that Crane tensed at the sound of Jeremy's voice. Still on his knees, he looked out towards the sidewalk over his left shoulder, as if to make sure he was seeing what he thought he was. He stood up and scratched his head underneath his wide brim straw hat.

"Jeremy," he said, more as a question than a greeting. Crane approached the fence where Jeremy waited slowly, adjusting the spectacles on his face as he did.

"You didn't think I was going to stay cooped up inside on a gorgeous day like this, did you?" Jeremy asked, with a smile and a laugh.

Everything was striking him just the right way today, as if the world itself just wanted to reach out and tickle him.

"No," Crane said, slowly. "No, I suppose not."

Jeremy looked over Crane's shoulder and admired the work that he had done on the garden so far.

"The yard looks great," Jeremy said. "I can practically taste those tomatoes already."

"Be a few more weeks at least," Crane said. He seems a little distracted by something too, thought Jeremy. How could I be on such a different wavelength from everybody else on a day like this.

"Are you feeling O.K., Frank?" Jeremy asked.

"Sure," Crane answered quickly. "What about you, Jeremy?"

"I feel like a million bucks, Frank," Jeremy said, taking in a deep breath and beating his chest with his fists. Crane winced for a second. "Hell, I feel more like a billion bucks to tell you the truth."

"That's good," Crane said. "Real good. You take care of yourself. I've got to head in and make a quick phone call."

Jeremy nodded and reached out his hand to pat Crane's shoulder or have a quick shake, but his neighbor was moving quickly towards his house.

"Jeremy! Jeremy!" It was Carol yelling from their front porch and she sounded frantic.

"I'm over here, babe!" Jeremy yelled back and started making his way back to the house. She ran down the steps towards him and started to corral him back inside.

"No. Come on, let's enjoy the day," Jeremy said. "Go for a walk with me."

They heard the faint ringing of their telephone.

"Come inside," Carol shouted over her shoulder as she ran in to pick up the phone before the answering machine picked up.

Begrudgingly, Jeremy started back up the steps to the porch. Once he reached the front door, he looked back at the delightful scene on his suburban street. Part of him wanted to just run, down the street and out of the subdivision. He told himself that if he'd have had his wallet on him he would have taken off for the day or the weekend. It

would have felt amazing to just tackle the world head on and see where the day took him, but that would have been a betrayal to Carol and everyone he knew. He walked inside the house and shut the door on the beautiful day.

He couldn't see Carol. She was sitting upstairs in the guest bedroom, but he could hear snippets of her conversation as she talked in a low whisper.

"I'm trying," she said, with the next few moments of her dialogue obscured. What was she trying to do, Jeremy wondered. Keep me captive in my own home? Make love to me without puking? Tell me she wants a divorce? Jeremy was listening so intently that a tiny headache started to creep to the front of his head.

"As far as he's concerned, nothing's wrong," she said. That had been true when he woke up that morning, but now, clearly something was wrong. He could feel it like a cramp in his stomach. It pierced him and he drew in a breath and doubled over.

"...hide it forever," Carol said and judging by her tone, Jeremy knew she had told the person that she couldn't hide it forever. "That's an awful thing to say," she snapped back in a voice that didn't seem to care if Jeremy heard her or not.

Jeremy closed his eyes. It all made sense to him now. Carol was having an affair. She was trying to find the courage to tell me about it, to break up our marriage, but she hasn't been able to. At least not yet. She told her lover that her husband didn't suspect a thing. As far as he was concerned, nothing was wrong, but she wouldn't be able to hide it forever. Jeremy noticed he was trembling. His hands shook and he couldn't stop them, even when he placed them on his legs. His whole body began to quiver and feel weak. Jeremy could hear Carol sobbing on the phone and despite his anger at that moment, stinging tears crept into the corners of his eyes.

This is what it feels like when a marriage ends, Jeremy thought to himself. The body breaks down when it knows it will be separated from someone it had been with for so long. Scenes from their marriage flowed behind his closed eyes. He saw them dancing on the beach at their wedding and kissing in a horse drawn carriage on

the streets of London. He saw a flash of white light and felt a searing pain in his head before falling to his knees.

"You don't know what it's like," Carol whispered harshly, getting quieter when she felt she was speaking too loud. The next thing Jeremy heard before Carol hung up the phone was "It's killing me too."

Enraged Jeremy got to his feet and started towards the steps. His legs, which had felt so light and full of life moments ago were now heavy and very unsteady. He grabbed the railing with his clammy and still trembling hands and pulled his way up, step by step. The pain in his head was so severe that Jeremy exhaled deep breaths repeatedly, hoping that it would relieve even the slightest bit of pressure or at least make this sudden wave of nausea pass.

Finally, after making it to the top step, he collapsed face down on the shaggy, freshly vacuumed carpet. Carol must have heard the noise of his body falling because she sprinted out of the bedroom and looked down at her husband with a mixture of shock and fear.

"Oh my God, Jeremy!" she cried out, running to his side and crouching down beside him. "Are you all right?"

Jeremy tried to bat her away, he wanted to strike her and then beat her repeatedly for what she was doing to him, but his arm flailed weakly towards her.

"Get away from me, you bitch," he croaked. "How could you do this to me?"

"What, darling," she cried, tears streaming down her face. "Do what?"

"You're having an affair!" Jeremy shouted, the words burning his dry throat like fire. "I heard you talking to him on the phone just now!"

Carol fell backwards and placed her head on the hallway wall.

Jeremy raised himself up on to his knees so that he could tower over her.

"Do you expect me to feel sorry for you?" Jeremy roared. "You vomit when you try to fuck me."

"I'm not having an affair," Carol whispered in a meek, little voice.

"Liar!" spat Jeremy. "You're a damn liar!"



"I'm not," Carol said in a stronger voice, fire now in her eyes. "How dare you! I can't believe that you could even think that lowly of me after all we have been through."

Once again, Jeremy tried to hit her, but Carol didn't even cower, as if she knew that Jeremy didn't have it in him. He dropped his arm, which felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds, and fell backwards, gasping for breath.

"What do you remember, Jeremy?" Carol asked coolly. "How far back can you remember?"

Jeremy thought it was a silly question, but decided to play along.

"I remember growing up by the ocean with a large apple tree in my back yard," Jeremy said, trying to go back to his old home in his mind.

"More recently, Jeremy," Carol said, with a tone of voice that teetered near scolding him. "Where do you work?"

Jeremy's mind went as blank as a new sheet of paper. He tried to conjure images of himself in suits, at meetings, talking on the phone at a desk or tapping away at a computer keyboard, but the pictures in his mind dissolved almost instantly. He had to have a job, right? How could they afford this house if both of them weren't working? What did he typically do all day?

"What did you do yesterday?" Carol asked sadly, knowing that he didn't know the answer.

Jeremy's eyes grew wide with panic. He was desperately trying to prove Carol wrong, hoping that any second he would come up with something. A small moan escaped from his throat.

"You're sick, Jeremy," Carol said. "Very, very sick."

"Why don't I remember that?" Jeremy asked, the good feelings of the morning completely washed out of his system. He lay on the floor feeling like he was sinking through the carpet and would soon come out on the other side, floating near the ceiling.

"You didn't want to remember. You wanted at least one day where you weren't thinking of the illness that was eating its way through your body or the pain you are constantly feeling. Just one day where you thought more about being alive than dying," Carol explained,

running her fingers gently through Jeremy's hair, moving it off his sweaty brow.

Jeremy forced himself to sit up. He wanted to call Carol a liar, but he felt so weak and the aching in his bones was so sharp that he knew she was telling the truth.

"How?" Jeremy asked, as he placed his head on Carol's lap so she could resume her soothing caresses.

"You found a hypnotist who claimed to be able to do things like this and you were adamant we give it a try," Carol stated. "As you said, there was nothing to lose. She came over yesterday evening and placed you in a hypnotic trance, telling you that when you woke up this morning, you wouldn't remember any part of being sick. You would feel as healthy as you ever did and everything would look as beautiful as you always remembered."

"It worked," Jeremy said in a dry whisper. Though he couldn't generate any more tears, he cried for everything that had been lost to him.

"Yes, darling it worked, better than anyone could imagine," Carol said. "And though you felt strong and healthy this morning, you are dying."

Jeremy thought of how he bounded down the stairs that morning and wolfed down a breakfast fit for a king. He smiled as he remembered how beautiful everything was and how every sense seemed heightened that day. The smile faded as he remembered how Carol and Frank Crane had looked at him. After all, they had seen him as he truly was and had been frightened for him.

Jeremy pushed himself up on wobbly legs and braced himself on the hallway wall as he made his way to the master bathroom.

"Where are you going, Jeremy?" Carol asked, spotting him from behind in case he fell.

Jeremy stood before the large mirror and did not see the vibrant picture of health that he had seen that morning. Instead, he saw a pale, broken and fragile shell of a man. He was mostly bald with small patches of stringy dark hair and he had sunken eyes and sores on his face and neck. He looked ancient and withered. In the mirror

he saw that Carol appeared older and haggard. He could see the toll that caring for him had taken on her. The scene outside the window was also different from what he had seen that morning. It was a black and blustery, winter day with snow and sleet slapping itself against the windows. There was old, gray snow on the ground and very little was moving out in the cold. Cold that an incredibly sick Jeremy had ventured out in in just a t-shirt and loose jeans.

“Bring her to me again,” Jeremy said as he made his way back to bed. He pulled the heavy covers of the quilt over him and shivered. “I need to forget again.”

