

Sex Tape

by Stephen Stark

The old adage that workplace romances are fraught with difficulty was especially true if your workplace was Hollywood—or more specifically, the soundstage of *Girlfriends*, the sitcom heading into its highly anticipated fourth season—and the ‘romance’ in question was with your incredibly vapid and self-involved (if genuinely hot) costar, Masters Wood, whom Ellen Gregory was now watching as he watched himself in the mirror.

Ellen Gregory understood exactly why she had decided to have an affair—affair being not really the word that she would have preferred—with Masters Wood. It was simple and it was ugly: He was attractive and he was available, and she had insisted that he get tested for STDs and he was clean. That she found him spiritually, morally, and intellectually vacuous—even if he was totally hot—and more or less personally repugnant went with what Dr. Ling, her therapist, described as her self-loathing.

The thing was that when you're working on a sitcom it's pretty much a 24/7 sort of thing, and there's really very little time for an actual relationship. In a sense, the choice to sleep with Masters was about two things, a) relieving her sexual tension through purely animalistic sex, and b) a perhaps semi-subconscious desire/need to punish herself for her complete inability to have a (real) romantic relationship by having sex with someone she found more or less personally repugnant. And, okay, perhaps there was also a c), which c) she would likely not have admitted to herself but had to do with a deep and persistent and really annoying desire to be close to someone.

She wasn't sure exactly how long she had been sleeping with Masters—not because she didn't know, but because she didn't want to know. Every time she saw him, she wanted to break it off. And every time she did not.

And so when he suggested to her that they make a sex tape, because that's what everyone was doing, she wasn't really surprised.

And there was a truly repugnant part of her it sort of fit in with b) (see above), and her desire for moral and emotional self-flagellation.

We should do a sex tape, he said.

Why on earth would I want to do that?

Career move. Think about it, Masters said. A sex tape would be, like, totally inspired as a career move. For both of us. I mean think of all the people who've done sex tapes, and all of them have just gotten more famous. You know...? Masters was looking at himself in one of the many mirrors in his bedroom, trying different angles, watching where the shadows fell on his chest (he was in love with his pecs) and now and then glancing back at her.

She said: First of all, you have to be a certified loser for that to be any sort of positive career move at all. And while that may be true of you, Masters, I do not include myself in that category.

But someday everyone's a loser.

Speak for yourself.

Ellen sat up in his bed.

If you ever so much as *mention* it again—not to mention if you've stuck a video camera around somewhere around here that I can't see—I will make sure your contract is cancelled. I will make sure that you are off the show. I will however see to it that your character has a beautiful death. Better than your own. I will personally pay for gangsters to come and deface you. Literally. And you will not die but live out your life as the miserable, ugly person you are.

Masters Wood played Peter on *Girlfriends*. Peter was a handsome, chest-waxing hypochondriac who had once dated her character, Gina, but was now Gina's best friend. Masters was perfect for the part because he was essentially a handsome, chest-waxing hypochondriac, and since he was a marginal-at-best actor, with a bit part in a lucky sitcom, it didn't require a lot of work. He was gorgeous in a *prima facie* sort of way, tall and slim and athletic, with washboard abs, and a gym-defined chest that was picture perfect. But his kind of beauty—common in LA as sunshine—was a thing that did not wear well. The longer you knew him, the less attractive he

was. His character, Peter, was slightly more tolerable, if only because you only had to spend 22 minutes with him at a time.

You couldn't do that, he said.

It was more a question than a statement. He had a look that inspired nothing but distrust. She searched his face, and it was a look she had seen before—like a dog caught getting into the dog food bag.

Ellen said: Where is it, you slimy shit.

What? he said, but he was such an unconvincing actor, it was almost impossible for him to lie effectively, even though he did it habitually. He just stood there, looking dull and vacant.

I'm going to make a few phone calls, Ellen said. We do a quick little Masters-ectomy, and then you'll be free to wait tables again. I mean once your face and kneecaps heal. She got out of bed. She was still naked.

She wanted nothing more than to humiliate him and, if possible, grind out whatever self-esteem he had like a cigarette butt. She went to her purse, took out her phone, and clicked it on.

I just signed a new contract. You can't do anything.

Masters, sweetie, you are so totally dumb, she said, her voice going from tough old broad to syrupy coquette. I am so like completely kidding. I think it would be a really super idea.

You do? He blinked.

Sure. It'd be fun. But how would we do it? Would we hire a crew to shoot us to make it look good, or would we shoot it ourselves for that sort of *cinema verité* look?

Masters got a smug, incredibly pleased-with-himself look. No need, he said. He went to one of the mirrors and it opened almost like a medicine cabinet. His bedroom, it turned out, was essentially all false walls. Inside, there was a camera mounted on a tripod. The walls inside were painted black so you couldn't see through the mirrors.

She laughed: What is this, the Gene Simmons setup?

Still completely naked, she went toward it, so that he would think he was getting the best footage of his life, and stood looking at it.

This was footage—or boobage—that he would most definitely *not* be seeing again.

So this has been on for how long?

Since we came in. There are motion detectors.

He was beaming with pride. He simply had no idea how much of an asshole he was.

She turned and got her clothing and started to put it on. So where'd you get this? she said casually.

Came with the house. That was half the reason I bought it.

He was in the bathroom now. A key turned in a lock and he came through into the other side where the camera was. As she followed him, she buttoned her blouse. Behind the mirrors were several more cameras, each strategically placed. Tying them all together was a computer. No doubt there were others in the ceiling.

Dude who owned the house before me, Masters said, He was some kind of basketball player or something. He had, like, *thousands* of women on tape. Masters was so proud of his setup that he seemed utterly clueless that another person might find it completely disgusting and perverted to be videotaped during sex without their knowledge or consent. Like a twisted frat boy real estate agent, he gave her the complete tour.

The cameras were connected to the computer wirelessly and transmitted their video feeds back to it. You could fit about 200 years worth of video on the computer, and then each session—this was the word he used, *session*, like he was a fucking portrait photographer at Sears—could be filed and saved and edited professionally if you wanted it to be.

So we could just use the footage you've already got?

Sure, he said. Easy. I didn't have any of ours edited, but, you know....

She cut him off: Show me what you have.

No doubt this town was full of women who would be delighted to be in Masters's complete home porn collection. She was not one of them. Every time she was with him, she had wanted nothing more than to go home and take a shower and rid herself of any trace of

him. Which was more or less how she felt about all the affairs and/or liaisons she'd had since she'd been in L.A. And maybe even since back in New York.

Each of which of course had been strategic. In a business that aims to mimic life, it was hard for life not to mimic business. And in a business that relied on suspension of disbelief, it was not uncommon for otherwise perfectly intelligent people to convince themselves of nearly anything.

But of course nothing ever exactly seemed this way at the time. You always found a way to convince yourself that you were so wild about this producer or that actor not because of the money or the house or the show, but *because he was such a great guy*. But just because you woke up in someone else's bed didn't mean there was a relationship. Or love, which she was growing increasingly certain did not exist—or existed only for fools.

Once at dinner with Marty, she had mentioned it, the death of love, and he had said something that for her encapsulated it pretty well: Out here you either have ice water running in your veins or you don't have a career.

She watched Masters and was overcome with a feeling of deadness. Or perhaps it was that she was overcome with a feeling of being *aware* of her deadness. Masters pushed some buttons and looked up at her eagerly. He said, Look, a surprise, and hit a button.

On the enormous plasma display in his bedroom, up popped a rather too familiar face, framed by naked shoulders and dangling hair. It wore a heavy-lidded, weirdly sneering, nostril-flared look of someone chewing on a hangnail, but both hands grasped at the sheets as it bobbed toward and away from the camera. The face was blurry and bouncing, but it was impossible not to recognize it as belonging to her best friend.

You screwed Patti *Gelfman*, my best friend, my publicist? When did you shoot this?

Couple of days ago. You don't mind that Patti and I, you know. Do you?

No, no, she said. I was just going to say that the color is really good. You did a great job of lighting it.

I knew you'd be cool about it.

Patti Gelfman had been Ellen's best friend for at least a decade, and to find out that Masters had fucked her—actually, that *Patti* had fucked *him*—was a bit like a punch in the gut. Not that Ellen had any sort of exclusivity with Masters. And not that she herself *wanted* any exclusivity. But what kind of asshole had she been to Patti that Patti would want—as soon as Ellen had let it slip that she was screwing Masters—to run over and screw him too? (As if she didn't know.)

Was this a kind of payback for her so-called best friend?

Long ago and far away in New York, Patti had, like Ellen, been a wannabe comic/actress, but while Ellen kept at it, Patti quit and started taking marketing and public relations classes at NYU. She was something of a trust fund baby—a kid whose daddy-the-colorectal-surgeon made it possible, through his good will and generosity, for her to be an endless sort of dilettante. Which was, in its way, fine with Ellen. She'd had more than one dinner on the Gelfmans. She had sat with them, felt jealous at their familial bond but at the same time had felt grateful to her own parents for their reserved aloofness, their insistence that she separate herself from them (although perhaps not quite to the extent she had). For Patti, the skids had been greased. She did not have the ever-present sense of incipient failure that Ellen did, the sense of desperation. At first she had talked about going to law school, being an entertainment lawyer, but she liked sitting around talking, on the phone or in cafes or bars, a lot better than she liked studying—which was also just fine with Ellen.

They had walked through New York streets at dawn more than once after Ellen's gigs, drunk and laughing, and Patti had always been a person Ellen could rely on as a friend as much as a conceptual best friend. The thought was ugly, and Ellen had always realized it but Ellen's ultimate, if unstated and maybe unconscious goal had been to buy Patti away from the doting and loving daddy.

Sick avarice. Yes. When she started to make money, she hired Patti as her publicist, and while she was good at it, mainly Ellen just wanted to have her around, like a homie or something, to pay her more and more, to make her hang up on mom or dad. Just to prove that she could. Okay, so it was twisted, except that she never actually knew that she was doing it until a therapist brought it to her attention. And then it was sort of hard to deny.

Then somewhere along the line, Patti came to have a kind of power over her as her best friend, because the more recognition she got, the harder it became just to have girlfriends, to sit in a café and have a cup of coffee and rely on some sense that this was a person who had no designs on you, who could be trusted. The people you tended to feel most comfortable around were people you had known forever, and Patti was the only person she trusted, or the only girlfriend type. And now—she was smart enough to realize the obvious—she knew that she had been scammed as much as she had scammed, and there was an emptiness. Who knew if all those late nights on the telephone, chatting, being catty, were not on tape somewhere in a safe deposit box, just waiting for the day.

It had been said—more than once—that Hollywood is like high school, but worse, and it was a trope that you couldn't deny but only add to, like but the drugs are better, but the kids are more vicious, but the clothes are better, etc etc blah blah blah blah.

So Patti had fucked Masters, whom she knew Ellen was fucking, and from all those late night chats knew just about as much about Masters as it was possible to know.

This was Hollywood-style naked resentment, pardon the choice of words. There was no way Patti could have thought it wouldn't piss her off. And yet it didn't exactly. Somehow it was just business.

Masters said, Look, here *we* are.

How about that? You have cameras in the ceiling, too?

The feeling of deadness grew and it had the effect of elongating time, making each moment insufferably long. Everything unfolded like a slow motion replay.

So where's the video stored? Ellen said.

There's a bunch of really big hard drives in the computer, Masters said. I could take it off and transfer it to beta tapes.

Hey, listen, I'm, like, feeling so parched. Could you get me a Coke or something?

Masters got up. You want diet or regular.

Regular, she said.

When he came back, he handed her an ice cold can and she took it.

Such a gentleman, she said.

Did you want me to open it for you? he said.

Glass would have been nice, but never mind. I'm not going to drink it anyway.

Why not?

Masters, you're a stud, but can you really be so, like, dim? She was shaking the can.

Why are you shaking it? he said before reality started to dawn.

He tried to grab her, but when her stalker had started following her, she had taken classes, and now she kicked him as hard as she could in the nuts and he went down, fast.

She cracked open the Coke can and sprayed it all over the computer until the screen fritzed out. Then she took one of the cameras and, while Masters retched on the floor, she folded up the tripod and swung it, smashing the nearest hinged mirror.

She kept swinging until she had broken everything she could break, including the computer monitor and the camera.

Sandy, the director, yelled, *Cut*, cut. But there was a great release in all this breakage, even if the glass was theater glass.

Ellen, Sandy said. *Ellen!* You're fucking up the set. Stop.

Sandy was bald and not very old and completely neurotic, but a good director. Right this second she hated him. She kept going, swinging and breaking mirrors and prop cameras until her arms were numb. There was so much glass. When at last she did stop, it was when she fucking felt like it. Her arms felt like jelly. A lot of people in the crew looked genuinely freaked. Masters was cowering.

The whole sex tape concept had been her idea. The fifteen or more minutes they'd just shot would be whittled down in the edit to a couple of decent but suggestive thirty- and sixty-second teaser spots. She would produce and supervise the edit.

She didn't usually do conceptual comedy, but everyone thought it was inspired. It was win-win-win. She got to make some indirect comments on the world within a world within a world that television was—not that anyone would get it. She got to put some edge into their usually-really-dull shooting, the network got a scandalous but topical series of promos for the show, and Masters got to look like a stud. And Patti got to look like the slut she was. Except in this town, it would probably only promote her career.

Later, at home, Ellen fell into bed and the deadness came over her. She wanted to be done with it all.

She had been on a manic jag for something like five or six unbroken years, a personal record, and a fact that was, she was certain, in no small way responsible for her pretty incredible success. She was a poster girl for what America could do for you if you were lucky (which included not just being drop-dead gorgeous, but also having a *look*, some indefinable quality that made people remember you). She was a poster girl for what could happen if you stood at or near the front door when opportunity knocked, opened the door, then worked your highly desirable type A ass to the bone—and slept with the right people. There was also the little issue of a possibly self-induced, bi-polar-ish situation that you wouldn't so much call a *disorder* as you would a lifestyle. And the last several years had been all up, not so much a manic jag as a totally prolonged bender.

It was Caffeine Life, totally jabberated personal talk radio 24/7—gallons of Starbucks and Diet Cokes, ma-huang and kola capsules, then nicotine patches (even though she'd never smoked), a couple of unhappy experiments with X and other amphetamines and mind-blowing amounts of serotonin-pumping exercise (dozen mile runs in the mornings, step-aerobics in the afternoon, six days a week). But she had been working, working, and happy happy happy

happy all the time, able to walk into a room and win it, no matter how big, win it in a matter of a few seconds because she had the stuff, she was the *woman*, she was Ellen, or *ELLEN!*[™], America's Favorite Girl Next Door (certified, bona fide A-List Pussy, or so she had been informed by the Hollywood council that kept track of pussy listings).

And now. A few years ago, even a year ago, the chance to do this kind of comedy would have been totally inspiring and uplifting, but a few years ago, it would have been *fiction*. She *had* fucked Masters, and he had surreptitiously videotaped it. He had fucked Patti and videotaped that, too. And she had kicked him in the nuts and destroyed his computer.

Her life had been a sort of jujitsu act, from the moment she had been nicknamed Runt in high school. She had learned—painfully—to take up the part of herself that was most vulnerable and naked and terrified—learned to take it away from other people, that is—and make it funny.

Now, she almost dreaded sitting down at the Avid with the editor and looking at it again. It was just a reminder that she was no longer particularly real. That she had the multiple personality disorder of TV. That somewhere along the way she had gone from a wide-eyed and naïve and ambitious kid to some sort of reptilian Hollywood creature. That leather-skinned, hardened Hollywood broad with ice water juicing through her veins. She did—had done—things she knew were ugly, and somehow all of it was supposed to have been justifiable. But none of it was.

