

the 52  
Seductions  
Betty  
Herbert

headline

# Prologue

I realise how prudish I am about to sound, but that's not the case at all.

No, I am not prudish; I have just been married for ten years. There is a difference, although I suspect that if I drew a Venn diagram in which one circle represented 'prudishness' and one represented 'having been married for ten years', there would be considerable overlap. I mention this to Herbert, and he says, 'A vulva-shaped overlap.' This is how bad things have got. It's way past Freudian.

Look, see, I am not prudish. There, in the paragraph above, I freely used the word 'vulva' without a care in the world. Oh, I can talk good sex, me. Just watch me down the pub on a Saturday night. I'll be the one cracking bawdy jokes in the corner, making the rest of the table howl with embarrassment.

I am, however, all talk. I'm expert in conversationally faking it. In real life, in the bedroom, I am about as sexually enlightened as Mary Whitehouse. Actually, scrub that. I have no right to cast aspersions on Mary's erotic drive. For all I know, she could have been a bit of a goer.

The point is, I am not naturally uptight. I was not brought up in sexually repressed circumstances (quite the opposite – my mother's sheer enthusiasm for sex would put Samantha Jones to shame), and I do not in any way disapprove of sex. It's just that I've come to feel a bit icky about it involving me.

We started off on great form, Herbert and I. We could

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barely put each other down. But that was fifteen long years ago now, and I was just eighteen. Now, at thirty-three, sex seems so far away from me that I struggle to remember the point of it. We rarely do it at all, and when we do, it's usually out of a sense of obligation. *How long's it been? A month? Well, I guess we really ought to have a shag then. Hang on, I'll go and shave my legs first.*

It feels, sometimes, as though all of my desire has run away. It's just not there any more. Desire used to creep up on me and set my body and my imagination ablaze. It used to be triggered by the most intangible things: the smell of warm skin on a summer afternoon, a shared glance. Nowadays, even when I look for it, it's strangely absent. I remember it well, and it seems that this should be enough to conjure it up at will. But no. Instead, I feel as though I'm calling after a lost cat. Everything tells me that something should come running, but I am shouting into an empty backyard.

This isn't a book about the dying of love. Herbert and I adore each other and are extremely, smugly happy. We don't have any children to exhaust us or get in the way of our sex life. It's just that the fireworks ceased in the bedroom long ago. In their place, we have developed something resembling embarrassment.

Surely a loving relationship should encourage experimentation? In my experience, it does not. Herbert is my best friend, my confidante, my scaffolding. He is the person who takes care of me, whether or not I'm sick. He knows what makes me sad and what makes me angry. He knows what makes me happy. The sense of safety that has built up between us is the most valuable thing in the world.

But this safety is a death-blow to desire. The modern

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marriage is just too damned fraternal. Who wants to compromise all that wonderful security by asking for sex? We share the cooking and the cleaning, we talk about our feelings, and we do our best to support each other through life's trials. Where's the sex in that? Where's the mystery? Where's the erotic frisson?

In the clean, new world of the modern marriage, sex is the nefarious toad lurking at the bottom of the garden. We're secretly afraid of it, but we know we ought to find it fascinating. We couldn't bring ourselves to actually kill it, so we just hope it will die of its own accord. It is an inconvenient reminder of the state of nature we think we've designed out of our lives.

Even if, suddenly, I was seized by a fit of passion and wanted to ravish Herbert, I wouldn't know where to start. We just don't have the language for sex any more, verbally or physically. We've lost our sexual imaginations. It would pain me to admit to Herbert that I found a film, picture or outfit sexy. It would just seem too ridiculous. I am his stable, sensible wife. It's not that he would disapprove; it's just that he would be so surprised that we would both become snared in self-consciousness. Sex is like a secret I'm keeping from myself.

I would have hated to admit it when I was eighteen, but I was inexperienced. Somehow, by staying with the same partner since then (and both of us have been utterly faithful, I'm sure of that), I have retained the sexuality of an eighteen-year-old. Less saucy than it sounds, I can assure you, particularly without the benefits of a teenager's firm midriff.

If you'd have asked me back then what sex with Herbert was like, I would have said, quite truthfully, mind-blowing. But the problem is, we kept having that same sex over

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and over again. Devaluation occurred. Mind-blowing at eighteen, if it doesn't develop, translates to boring at thirty-three. And we are strangely content to look back fondly on memories of our past sexual exploits rather than generating new ones. How I envy my friends who sailed through dozens of partners in their twenties! They have a whole rainbow of experience that I just can't access.

Yet something has changed. For a start, we managed to have sex after a particularly long break, even by our standards. This may have been due to the fact that we found ourselves staying in a hotel room with its own Jacuzzi and a supply of lube in the cupboards. This is what happens when you get upgraded to the Honeymoon Suite. It would have been a shame not to make full use of the facilities. But more to the point, the sex was bloody good. So good, in fact, that (after we'd stopped reeling with surprise) we did it again. Three times in one weekend. Quite something for us, I can assure you.

It was like being hit by a revelation. What a perfect, complete idiot I've been. What a bloody waste! So many women of my age are out embarking on sexual adventures but craving The One. I found The One years ago, and wasted him. My sexuality is my own responsibility. What's the point in sacrificing it to my own, very English, sense of embarrassment? Fifteen years together should lead to some sort of expertise; in our case, it has led to a kind of blind, dumbfounded ignorance. Even if I wanted to, I would have no idea how to turn Herbert on. I have no idea of his erotic tastes and preferences, let alone my own. I have made a habit of saying no even before the question is asked, and it's time that stopped.

Nervously, I sidle up to H in the kitchen and make a proposition. 'We're never going to be the couple who have

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sex every day,' I say, 'so let's be more realistic. What if we book a date for sex once a week, but with a twist? We take it in turns to arrange a seduction for each other every week for the next year.'

I am surprised how readily he agrees – in fact, a lovely smile spreads over his face. 'Okay,' he says.

'We have to stick to it, though,' I say. 'Both of us. It'll take a bit of effort.'

'I think I can manage that.'

'When we were first together, part of the reason the sex was so good was because we'd looked forward to it all day. We could do with a little more of that anticipation.'

'Fine,' he says; 'good. Great! So long as it doesn't have to be too elaborate, always.'

'No, not elaborate. Just interesting. Just *intended*.'

'And that doesn't mean to say that we can't have sex at other times too.'

'Don't push your luck.'

This is how the seductions begin.

I wake up the next morning and think: *Oh God, I actually said that aloud*. It was a lovely idea floating around in my head, and I've gone and ruined it by turning it into some bizarre sex pact. I now have to imagine – and own up to – twenty-six seductions over the next year, and be open-minded about the twenty-six that Herbert throws at me. Inside, I am already curling up with embarrassment.

It's alright, I think. I don't expect Herbert will say anything if we just let the idea drop. It wouldn't be the first time, after all. But Herbert is breezing around the kitchen, actually whistling.

'Seeing as it's your idea, I think it's only fair that you do the first seduction,' he says.

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'Um, yes. Right. Probably.' I can't really argue with his logic, and I don't suppose he's any keener than I am to be the first to suggest something.

'Friday then?'

'Friday.'

Trapped in the confines of my imagination, a seduction seemed like such a fun, thrilling thing. Out in the open, it has taken on an air of menace. A seduction is an expression of your personal sexual taste, an invitation to share a pleasure. If you're not sure what you like any more, that's a terrifying prospect.

In desperation, I do as any sane woman would: I type 'seduction' into Google.

My goodness, there's a lot out there. I'm scared of clicking on something I don't want to see. I'm even more scared of clicking on a link that opens infinite windows, or decimates my hard drive altogether. Exactly how do you navigate this world and sort the good from the bad? What am I even looking for?

I am relieved to see a national newspaper near the top of the listings. Gingerly, I click on their 'Ten Best Sex Toys' guide. Ribbon handcuffs, a quilted spanking paddle, a 'hot and cold ceramic dildo'. Steady on. I have to go and pour myself a glass of wine. Is this normal? Is everyone doing this?

I follow their links, hoping for something a bit more beginner-level. The first URL has clearly fallen victim to the recession, and its contents have been replaced by something much dodgier-looking. I close down the window post-haste.

I reject the next site simply for its poor aesthetics. Too many pictures of pumped-up blondes make me think of nylon knickers, I'm afraid. I may be putting my whole

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sense of self on the line here, but I see no reason to compromise my good taste. Or give myself thrush, for that matter.

Worse, the higher-end stuff prices me out of the market. The newspaper directs me to what looks like a knuckle-duster ('worn on the middle finger of one's strongest hand'), which costs £560 from Coco de Mer. I mean, really. I struggle to imagine the circumstances in which I would pay that much for a quick session of mutual masturbation, assuming that's what you do with it. In truth, its applications are entirely mysterious to me.

Coco de Mer has already scared me off, anyway, with their leather dog mask (£220-worth of 'utilitarian bondage chic', apparently) and 300-quid knickers which are gorgeous but out of my league. I wonder, shamefaced, if I'm not more of an Ann Summers girl, at least in terms of price range, if not ambition.

Coco de Mer at least features arty photos of women with meat on their thighs and non-Brazilianed pubic hair. Insinuate's site is full of porny young women offering their thin bodies up to the male gaze. I wonder how many men buy their stuff and are disappointed when they see their partners' bodies in it. We can't possibly live up to that. I nevertheless consider a pair of Bridgette spanking briefs – until I see the back of them. I'm just not sure that my arse crack merits its own window. Probably the fact that I'm calling it my arse crack tells you all you need to know.

Ann Summers it is then. I'm expecting a proliferation of ruching, sateen and cheap lace, all in the obligatory red. I'm not entirely wrong, but to be honest, most of it wouldn't look out of place in M&S these days. This simultaneously depresses and comforts me. By this point I am anyway in a state of utter despair. I click disconsolately

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through the site, wondering if saucy underwear is really what I need. It's not as if I've surrendered to five-pack pants and greying bras. I like to think that my underpinnings are rather well maintained actually; you never know when you are going to be run over by that bus.

I sense a revolt brewing. Why do I have to buy something to be sexy? And when did we develop this notion that we must accessorise in order to have sex at all? You can buy vibrating cock rings in Boots these days, for heaven's sake. I can't help but feel that we are losing the core of our sexuality under this deluge of frills and numbing vibration.

Thus resolved, I shut down my laptop, wondering what on earth I am going to do if I have to rely on my imagination alone.





# December



## **Seduction #1**

### The First Date

The day of the first seduction arrives, and I find myself considering wearily how the special events of life, like birthday presents and keeping in touch with old friends, are always my responsibility. Why do I have to invent the first seduction? Perhaps we could just have a nice discussion about it tonight, and maybe make a wall chart together or something. You know where you are with a wall chart.

But then, at some point along the way (and in fact this is at about 5 p.m., with Herbert due home in an hour), I realise how mean-minded I'm being. The spirit of the thing is not to measure tit against tat, to drag the same old, petty irritations into this. A seduction is an act of generosity, a gesture of goodwill. The resistance I'm feeling is rooted in fear rather than any genuine sense of grievance.

I practically hurl myself into the bath, managing to

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shave my legs and underarms without a great deal of bloodletting. It's a good (if unusual) omen. I may not have a seduction ready, but I shall at least be utterly lovely when he arrives home. I spray a bit of perfume around and consider putting on the rather hot red dress I wore to a party last Christmas. No, I think, I will not dress up as someone else tonight; I will dress as myself. I want to feel relaxed and at my ease, not trussed up like a ridiculous turkey. There's more than a faint whiff of suburban housewife in that. After a bit of light deliberation, I put on a pair of seamed stockings with knee-high socks over the top, my best frilly knickers, a denim skirt and a stripy jumper. Looking at myself in the mirror, I feel relieved that I look much like normal, if slightly improved.

It is only when I'm putting on my make-up (lots of black eyeliner, in tribute to Herbert's rather unfortunate crush on Gwyneth Paltrow in *The Royal Tenenbaums*) that an idea arrives. What if we start all over again?

When I first met Herbert, I was still living with my mother, so I stayed at his house on weekends. I used to pack up my overnight things in a small, brown vintage suitcase and meet him at the pub. H has since commented, misty-eyed, that he knew his luck was in whenever he saw me with that case. The real McCoy has long since disintegrated, having been walked home in the rain too many times, but I do have a small, blue vanity case, bought recently in a charity shop, that might do the job. It will be useless, of course, if I don't take it out of the house. I must meet Herbert at the pub to get that whole 'first date' feeling.

I rather wish I had thought of this before six o'clock. Praying for Friday night traffic to delay H, I rush around the house, searching for the bloody blue case. When,

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eventually, I find it (stuffed down the side of the sofa, obviously), it is full of books. I tip these out on to the living-room floor and then immediately tidy them up again, realising that there's nothing remotely seductive about coming home to a bombsite (although this may actually have served to replicate the state of Herbert's house when I first met him). I deposit my purse, phone and keys into the case, throw on my lovely new black and white brogues, and nearly run out of the door, hoping that I won't bump into him walking up the road.

What actually happens is that our cat, Bob, follows me nearly all the way to the pub, wailing for my attention. He, however, is nowhere to be seen. I manage to palm off the cat on a passing woman with a toddler and slip into the pub, where I buy myself a steadying vodka and tonic. On a whim, I ask the barman if I can get a table in their upstairs restaurant a little later.

This will be a much more grown-up date than when we first met then. That happened in a gay bar on Christmas Eve 1995. I had been taken there by another man, who promptly left without me. I couldn't drive, the buses had stopped running and my mother couldn't pick me up for another two hours. There was no choice but to sit on my own and hope someone was willing to talk to me. Luckily, that person was Herbert. As soon as he sat down next to me, I felt like I'd been caught in a tractor beam. I went home to my family and told them I'd fallen in love.

In the here and now, I realise I'm surprisingly nervous. It all feels like a bit of a risk. I hope he's not disappointed. As I carry my drink to a table, I notice that a couple of men by the bar actually check me out. This has not happened in a very, very long time. It must have something

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to do with my look of intent; or maybe it's just that I'm a woman on my own on a Friday night. I text H: *For my first seduction, I'm taking you on a date. When you're ready, meet me in the pub.*

No reply. I gulp at my V&T, thinking that he almost certainly has a flat battery. It is ever thus with Herbert's phone. Fifteen minutes later, I get a text in return saying, *Groovy. On my way.*

I am reduced to drinking the melted ice in the bottom of my glass when Herbert arrives in his best shirt, looking more scared than I do. What a ridiculous pair we are. He goes to the bar and buys me a Cosmopolitan, which I drink gratefully. 'Look,' I say, 'I've brought my little case with me, just like old times,' and he looks baffled for a few beats and then laughs and says, 'What have you got in it?'

'Oh,' I say, 'just my keys, I'm afraid. And my wallet.'

But we're a bit more relaxed after this. We chat happily and he puts his hand on my knee. I feel quite splendid – sort of excited to be with him. He normally thinks it's pointless going to the pub on our own, but tonight it means that we have to pay each other some attention, rather than crashing out in front of the telly for a few hours before falling asleep. 'I wondered if I should put my suit on before I came out,' he admits after a while. I'm pleased that he felt like it was potentially that important, but glad he decided against it.

To cut a long story short, we have a couple more drinks and a very nice dinner (I have to swap starters with Herbert, who is rather alarmed by the rareness of his roast veal), and then we retire home and to bed. I draw a veil over the proceedings at this point, not through modesty, but because my memory is a little hazy after two cocktails,



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a vodka and tonic and half a bottle of wine. I have a vague notion that it involved the Reverse Cowgirl, but I can say no more than that. I can divulge, however, that we also had (entirely unscheduled) sex the next afternoon.

