

Sex Strike

Ovidie

Sample translation by Holly James

hollyglot@gmail.com | www.holly-james.com

Prologue

One day, I'd had enough.

Oh, there'd been warning signs, of course there had. This isn't the kind of thing that just happens overnight. Disgust came in waves at first, insidiously taking hold, until finally, I was completely overwhelmed. It was like mental exhaustion or burn-out. It became impossible to take another step, to drive a single mile further on this long, meaningless road.

I thought of the countless times I'd forced myself to have sex out of politeness, so as not to bruise fragile egos. All the times my pleasure had been an optional extra. All the times I hadn't come. All those nights of lying there bored or faking it in the hope it would be over more quickly. All the times it hurt before, during, after.

All the painful preparations, the hair removal, the endless penetration, the uncomfortable positions, the morning-after cystitis, the struggle to find an emergency doctor, the thrush infections (because washing their hands was too much to ask), the alkalinity of sperm that destroys the internal flora, the vaginosis. I thought of all the sacrifices I'd made to keep my listing on the fuckability market, all those years watching what I eat, all those hours of doing cardio on an empty stomach, at the point of passing out. All that money down the drain, blown on lingerie or heels that hurt my feet and made me hobble, overpriced creams that never lived up to their promises, cryolipolysis to freeze the fat cells, peels that burn the skin. All those forms of violence, each as expensive as the next. All those moments of torture, of paying to hurt myself. All that time wasted painting my nails and toenails, subjecting myself to face masks and scrubs, bent over the bathtub dying my grey hairs. The whole masquerade designed to attract punters or keep the spark alive after years of cohabitation. All those hours of instruction, training myself up as a sex technician to provide optimal satisfaction

when all I could expect in return was a sloppy attempt at cunnilingus followed by some half-hearted thrusting. An entire lifetime devoted to men's desire in the hope of gaining validation through their gaze. The voluntary servitude that heterosexual women submit themselves to for so little pleasure in return, no doubt for fear of being abandoned at the first sign of wrinkles, a pitiful old maid. All of a sudden, the whole thing became unbearable.

One day, I stopped having sex with men.

It's been almost four years since I went on sex strike. Nothing in particular prompted my decision to go out of commission. Or rather, it was prompted by a multitude of grievances about as classic as they come: An unhappy love affair, being cheated on several times, a "little" miscarriage that would once have been discreetly referred to as a "late period." At first, I didn't think of it as an official strike or a militant act. Nor was it even an act of vengeance *ad hominem*. It's not that I wanted anyone to go without dessert. This was a silent strike I staged from my bedroom just to see what would happen. I put a penny in the slot to see if anything would change—in my day-to-day life, my relationship with men, my relationship to my body, my relationship to the rest of the world. I didn't wake up one day and say to myself: "Tomorrow, I'm quitting," as if I were going on a diet or putting out my last cigarette.

This wasn't just a well-intentioned resolution I would never stick to. Nor was the decision without precedent. The previous year, I had staged a sort of prototype experiment in giving up sexual relations with men, a sign of things to come. I had decided to stage a "blow job strike." This brilliant idea came to me during a discussion with a friend when she told me she refused to go down on her lovers until she had come herself. Laughing, I replied that if I had to wait for my partners to make me come, the poor things wouldn't be getting many blow jobs. Then I realised: That was precisely the problem. The fact we accept having to satisfy them without protest, without asking for anything in return, paying without ever receiving. It seemed completely unfair to submit to such a one-sided exercise when clearly, my pleasure had never crossed my partners' minds, whether the partners in question were fleeting lovers or had placed a ring on my finger. I'd already been surprised to find myself, mind blank in the middle of a blow job, having a kind of out-of-body experience to mentally escape the situation, mechanically going through the motions,

writing an email or a shopping list in my head with a dick in my mouth. That's when I decided I wasn't going to pretend anymore. No more putting on an act. And a strike seemed to be the most obvious answer. It's not that I don't know how to play the role—I can do it perfectly well. The ideal girl who loves doing it, the girl who sits there waiting to be praised like an obedient dog. *That's it baby, you're so good at that.* No shit. Of course we're good at it. A chimpanzee would be good at it. The worst of it is, a blow job is sometimes the preferable option to penetration and all the after-sales care it requires: The shower, the irritation, the burning while peeing, the sachets of cranberry powder. Not to mention the fear of him not pulling out in time, or the condom splitting, or getting chlamydia, or finding myself, in two weeks' time, counting the days over and over, hoping my goddamn period will come, or the nausea after taking the morning after pill, or the fear of having to get an abortion alone. Sometimes it's better to go down on them for an easy life. Why do you think sex workers charge less for a blow job than sex? Because it requires a hell of a lot less energy and a lower pain tolerance.

Even so, there came a day when I could no longer bear the idea of doing it for free, for nothing in return. When I think of all those times I did it as a matter of course, I realise I would have much preferred them to leave me a twenty on the bedside table. At least then I might have been able to see the point. I think back to when my friend Laurence told me her boyfriend wanted her to go down on him every morning when they woke up. If she didn't satisfy this desire of his, he wouldn't speak to her for the rest of the day. She consented to doing her job without any real conviction in exchange for a bit of peace in her domestic life. If only he'd left her a twenty each time, too, then maybe the pair of us could afford to live in a convent, somewhere far away from men. We could start a community for women who can't bear to give any more blow jobs and there'd be enough of us to create our own micro-state, with our own flag, motto, and national anthem.

So that's how it all started, with a long-standing blow job strike. Then, one fine day, while I was tracking my cycle, I realised I hadn't had sex in three months. Three months turned to six, then

nine, and so on. A long-term, renewable contract with no obligation and no guarantee of what the future might hold. It was only natural that the blow job strike would eventually extend to a general sex strike. At the end of my first year on strike, I realised I didn't miss sex, and that a temporary measure was becoming something permanent. Three months of abstinence is harmless—everyone has experienced that. Just ask couples in long-term relationships. There's hardly anyone out there actually fucking twice a week. Or if they are, I'd like to know how they find the time and the desire. After six months, things begin to look a bit suspect. People start asking questions, including my gynaecologist, who was surprised when I said I didn't want the pill or the coil. "I'll see you again when you're pregnant, then?" Er, no. Unless it's an immaculate conception, I won't be pregnant the next time I see you. Still, six months without sex remains acceptable. You might just be taking a break or unlucky in love. It's after a year that things really start to look odd, at least for a woman of my age. I decided to give up sex at thirty-eight, a dozen years early, at a time when society still considered me useful. I'm now forty-two, which is

too young to be donning a chastity belt. Four years without sex at this age truly is a marginal case.

According to statistics, I'm not supposed to be shutting up shop until the menopause—the stage of life that's presented to us as a void, a kind of Bermuda Triangle where desire falls off the radar. It's the time when women become undesirable and are doomed to roam around, searching for an owner like a dog abandoned at the side of the road. At this point, I'm still only in my early forties, a cruel age for women. It's our sell-by-date, the point at which male consumers start wrinkling their noses as they peer at us like yoghurt pots at the back of the fridge, still edible, but only just. Only the more adventurous take the risk, because *sell-by dates are only a guide after all*, before eventually throwing out the old pots and replacing them with a brand-new pack. Women in their forties are at the age when they start admitting to themselves that they won't have any (more) children.

I can't help thinking back to that “little” miscarriage. I'm surprised at myself for saying

“little,” as though my grief should be proportional to the size of the embryo, barely larger than a bath oil bead. As though I should pretend that my final chance of pregnancy slipping away had no effect on me. Now I’ve reached the age of forty-two, I have to resign myself to the idea that I won’t have any more children, or if I do, it won’t be as easy as when I was twenty-five, and I certainly won’t have the same amount of energy. I have to accept that my eggs are now few and far between, and that I’d have to go through a whole host of intrusive examinations, watched like a pan of milk on the stove. What’s worse, I’d have to face those smug, scornful, know-it-all obstetricians who seem to think their patients are too ignorant to bother explaining things to. Incidentally, I didn’t make a doctor’s appointment after the miscarriage. I don’t trust gynaecologists (even female ones) any more than I trust men. I don’t want anyone touching me anymore. I could start another book: *One day, I stopped seeing my gynaecologist...* and it would be a best-seller, translated into thirty different languages, because so many of us have been humiliated and infantilised, sitting there with our legs in the stirrups like old cars being tinkered with by mechanics, forced to watch them carry on as

though there weren't an actual human attached to our vaginas.

What with going on sex strike and entering my early forties, I can't help questioning what my social value is as a woman. Because the thing that determines a woman's value is how fuckable she is, both in actual and symbolic terms. People like to say that a woman's role is to become a mother, first and foremost. The next step is to become an accomplished, "working mum". It's comical, actually, to see people on the internet defining themselves as "mompreneurs" in their bios. It's such hypocrisy, when we all know that our most fundamental role as straight women is to be fuckable above all else, and to capitalise on our fuckability. Not in cold, hard cash (good God, how awful!) because that would make us whores. And society hates whores. We can't bear their lucidity, because they've long known something we refuse to acknowledge: Heterosexuality is free labour. Yes, we heterosexual women are free whores, whether we're selling ourselves to one man or to the masses. We categorically refuse cash transactions, because that would be too honest, too

contractual. We want things to be sugar-coated. We want roses and love. We have this need to maintain the enormous lie that tells us that sexual or romantic relationships are altruistic. So let me say it loud and clear: In heterosexuality, nothing comes for free. It's a completely corrupt system. Women have been using sex as a bartering tool since the beginning of time. Whether it's in exchange for material goods, security, love, or a pay rise, they never fuck men completely for free, and there's one simple reason for that: Straight men are bad at fucking.

If there's no pleasure to be gained, we might as well face facts. This is purely an emotional-economic exchange. And if you think that's a stretch, ask yourself why, in fairy tales, young women want to marry the prince and not the prole, why in *Fifty Shades* and other chick lit classics, the heroine is happy to take a whipping as long as the hero has a bit of money. It's funny how all these BDSM tales that beat their romanticism into us always take place in castles and never in the projects or on a council estate. Beauty and sexual submission are all we have to offer in exchange for

a comfortable lifestyle, social capital, a title, a job, or even papers, because men are genuinely willing to believe that a woman half their age (whom they met in Thailand) could fall in love with them, paunch and all. Men's capacity to lie to themselves never ceases to amaze me.

But I can't stand this state of affairs any longer. And it's precisely because I no longer need men that I've gone on strike. I've racked my brains for what they might have to offer me, but I can't think of a single thing. I don't want their money or the safety net they supposedly provide. And I never have. I've always dated broke guys. Every time rich men or celebrities come sniffing around, I always make a run for it. I guess it's my way of refusing to be a trophy wife in the making. I won't give them what they think they have the right to demand. I don't want to owe them anything. I want to leave them when I feel like it, without severance pay, and keep my freedom.

Incidentally, how can anyone still believe that being in a couple offers any kind of security? What a stupid bet to make on the future, when inevitably,

the second the fortieth candle has been blown out on the cake, they rush off to fuck a girl twenty years younger, a girl young enough to be their daughter. But they'll never admit this to themselves. They can't bear to see their reflection in the mirror, can't bear the fact that they've become *that* guy, the guy they once despised, the fifty-something with the grey pubes who's sleeping with young girls who are way too pretty for him.

I know, I know, *not all men are bad, that's not entirely true, enough with the black-and-white thinking, that's a gross exaggeration, there are good men out there.* I hope so. I'm sure there are some good men out there, in fact. But life certainly never sent many my way.