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Dear National Organization of Good Men,

Thank you for your offer of membership!

I want to be make it clear that I consider it a great honor, and that, furthermore, I *do* understand that your ranks are in decline; that, as many women could attest (including Flannery O'Connor?), one of your members is increasingly *hard to find*.

However, I must decline your offer. You see, I am *not* a good man.

The misunderstanding is not your fault, it's mine. I often portray myself as 'the lovable loser' – the type of guy who, though he may often screw up, you can ultimately say, "Well, his heart is in the right place."

Gentlemen, I can assure you, nothing could be further from the truth.

Have I ever abused, or even cheated on, a woman? Of course not. My misdeeds are much less dramatic (more Midwestern) than that. And yet, if I were to tell you of The Most Significant Relationship Of My Life—actually just *one night* of that relationship— actually just *a few moments* of that night—

Well, I'm sure that you'd purge me from your mailing list as quickly as if my name were Stanley Kowalski.

Oct. 4, 2003

Spread across *my* bed is *her* comforter, a bright light blue, the color of oceans on maps.

For weeks, her stuff has been popping up at my apartment, replacing my shoddy bachelor items, and it's almost always an improvement – a new shower curtain, a real toothbrush holder. She's just staying at my place for a month, until my lease runs out, and we get a place together. In the meantime, hey, for once there's real food in the fridge.

I walk into the room and throw myself down on the comforter – face to the wall. She walks in and sits on the foot of the bed – opposite corner, continents apart.

“Are you still attracted to me?” she asks.

“Yes,” I say into the pillow.

“Cause if not,” she continues, “better let me know now, ‘fore I waste another three years!” Her timbre changes, hard tones going soft. “Dave, I’m serious, *listen* to me. No, *please*, you *have* to tell me. Dave. *Please*. Dave?”

Oh Jesus.

We’ve been looking at apartments all week, putting that pressure of the future upon us; living together, the relationship has been crammed into that crucible where the other starts to wonder if you’re really playing for keeps.

And tonight, she stopped off on her way home for a rare happy hour with the co-workers. Coming in, a little buzzed, she suddenly sat on my lap. As I watched bad TV, she even kissed my neck. I used to love this sort of caprice. But now?

Minutes later, with the water running for her post-work shower, she pokes her head out the bathroom door and asks, “Care to join me?”

I’m a pretty sexual person.

And yet, spying hints of her through the crack in the door, I don’t feel *turned off*, exactly – it’s worse than that. I feel *indifferent*.

“Sorry,” I say. “I’m waiting for a call from my brother.” I think she knows I’m lying, but simply shuts the door to suds herself alone.

Hours later, at a party, I end up flirting with an old flame without even realizing it – letting the old wandering eye out on too

long a leash. This is how the big argument starts, how we leave the party early, how I end up face down on the map.

“Yes, Jesus, of course I’m still attracted to you,” I finally say, adding the non sequitur, “I need cigarettes.” My walk to the store also takes me to the bar. I only return when I know she’ll be asleep.

Let me interrupt, Gentlemen, because I know what you’re thinking: You think I feel guilty for losing some attraction to my significant other. Well, yeah, I guess I *did*. But don’t worry. I know that’s no crime (if it were, every spouse would be in jail). I get that it’s something that happens to us all. No, the *true* perfidy is still on the way...

I wake in the middle of the night and don’t know where I am. Then I feel her weight next to me, and the heat coming off the small of her back.

And, not remembering the fight, I bury my face into the bevel between her shoulder blades and give a little kiss. And this, in turn, gives *me* a drug-like effect.

Or almost the opposite.

Like when a bad hangover lifts in the middle of the afternoon, just suddenly flies off and frees your sinuses and you look up and suddenly the sun doesn’t sting anymore, and you just instinctively smile? It’s like that.

And then I actually *do* lift my head and look out the window, and the neighbor is bounding around with his pit bull at 3 AM, and it seems impossibly idyllic – the vision of a ghetto version Norman Rockwell.

And I bury my head back between the blades and this time she makes a little sound, and arches into me, cat-like, and soon we are having that slow sleepy sex.

Afterwards, the mind goes monosyllabic. *Ah*, it thinks. *Mm*.
Yes. Hm. Nice. Hmm. Yes.

Then, even better, for a short while the mind thinks nothing at all.

And as I drift off, I'm sure she's already asleep – but I feel a bite on my wrist, a playful little bite, and hear her say, “We alright...”

But it sounds more like a question than statement.

And then she spins around to face me, eye to eye, suddenly wide awake and in that gaze where it seems like both your irises are riding the same rail right at each other, connected by hard little wires, and she says it again, “*Are we alright?*”

I roll over and stare at the constellation of cracks in the plaster, as if they might contain an answer.

“I’m serious,” she says. And is. I’ll get no rest ‘til I reply, and I can’t say a word.

I can’t say ‘yes’ because I don’t know if it’s a lie! Don’t know if I’ll get over my raw need for new lust. Don’t know if I’ll ever be able to answer the riddle of ‘How To Be With *Only One* Forever?’ Don’t know if I’ll ever be able to answer it with more than an ellipses...

How can I feel an ever-waning desire, day to day, and yet wake in the middle of the night and want nothing more than her warmth, and her warmth alone?

But I can’t say ‘no,’ either! I’ve been telling myself it’s because I don’t want to hurt someone that I hold so dear, but I see now that it’s more selfish than that. I can’t say no, simply, because I don’t want to *lose* her! *Can’t* lose her. Because— Because—

I'm sorry to interrupt, Gentlemen, but we're close to the crux and I can't sound trite.

You see, I want to tell you that *I loved her*. And that *she loved me*. I want to tell you, even, that *she loved me in a way no one else has*, and maybe even that *she showed me how to love*. I want to tell you all these things because I think these things are true.

But typed out, it sounds hollow, saccharine.

Instead, I'll tell you this:

I can't dance.

Can't. At all. But. I always *want* to.

And one night, when we were out together, she really *really* tried to get me to do it. But even with buckets of booze, I couldn't. Couldn't just let myself go and let myself dance. She made fun of me at first, until she realized. Realized just how much of a failing this was in my own mind, how it perfectly italicized my problems of *too much thought* and *not enough action*. So she laid off. And simply asked me, "If you were dancing alone in your apartment, curtains closed, what would you be listening to?"

"Al Green," I said.

When we got home, she shut off all the lights, put on Al Green, dropped all the blinds, and said, "No one can see you now. *I can't even see you now*. Will you dance with me?"

I did.

And I'm sure there are moments in my life that I've been happier, but to be honest, Gentlemen, I can't conjure a one.

This is the sort of woman we're talking about.

And now, three years into the relationship, she wants an answer. *Deserves* an answer. So hold your bated breath, Gentlemen... *What did I decide?!*

I roll over and mouth the word, "Yes" – but don't really mean it. I'm crossing my emotional fingers. I don't mean "No," either. What I mean is, "I'm tired and will decide this later." Then I kiss her.

She kisses me back, hard, and through smashed lips, whispers, “I love you.” Then she falls asleep. Secure. In the knowledge of a decision I haven’t actually made.

I look at her, filtered in that instant innocence of sleep, and realize I’ve done something. Something small and quiet but wrong. Betrayed an unspoken contract. *My god, Dave, I think, this is unfair. Tomorrow, you have to decide for real! Difficult or not, tomorrow you’re going to let her know!*

Yes, that’s right, Good Sirs! My big decision was...

To decide later!

To decide “tomorrow,” which actually means “never.” Because “tomorrow” turned into “before we move in together,” which turned into “before she goes to grad school,” which turned into “before we move to a new city together,” before before before, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...

And in fact, I never decided. Until a break-up was finally forced, *by her*, a full two years later. Me: Wish-washy to the last.

Don’t you see, *this* is why I’m not a Good Man. The problem isn’t with the word ‘good’ – the problem is with the word ‘man.’

A man (you guys know this!) is someone who makes *actual decisions*. He makes choices – things with consequences. Maybe he makes *bad* decisions with *bad* consequences (thus becoming a Bad Man), but at least he is present, *active*, in his own life.

Whereas I, like so many other adult boys I know, am neither bad nor good, but something else entirely: He Who Ultimately Wants To Keep His Options Open. If it’s not too much to ask (and it is), we’d like the comfort of lifelong love with the stimulation of new lust, or something like that, at least until Perfection comes through the door. In the meantime, don’t fence me in, don’t box me in, on and on, until the very end, even – so that (holding my beloved’s hand for comfort) my dying breath can also be a sigh of relief: *Hey, if I meet a cute angel on the way to the afterlife, at least I won’t be spoken for!*

Hovering *on the brink* of a decision, for years and years, he never moves forward into the future. He never grows up. He is never a man.

He is me, Gentlemen. He is me.

And now I'm too worked up. I need to step outside for a cigarette, and finish this letter in a moment...

Okay. Ahem. Back again. *Lastly...*

What is the reason for sending you this letter, when your invite arrived over two months ago? Well, I saw her again tonight, for the first time in nearly a year. She had her first big gig singing at a local club, and she sent out a mass email. Curiously, she included me. So I figured I should show up for support.

She was in great voice. And I don't want to be so arrogant as to assume I altered the set list, but the first song she sang after seeing me come in had a chorus that went, "Didn't know a good thing when you had it, no no no no..."

Surprisingly, when we had drinks in between sets, there was very little acrimony. It was really *nice*, actually – melancholy but sweet – almost like that great last scene in *Annie Hall* (though I'm sure your Organization isn't a big fan of Woody Allen, you have to admit that *Annie Hall* is pretty great movie). Strangely enough, she even covered "Seems Like Old Times."

I should mention that she is engaged now, and so is, finally, not mad at me anymore; in fact, she's now filled with that evangelism for partnership that seems to infect the soon-to-be-betrothed. "Seeing anyone?" she asked.

"Well, yeah... about four months now, actually," I said. "Oddly enough, *I* was the one pushing for it to be official. *Exclusive*, or whatever."

"Dave Mondy. Looking for commitment. That's *gotta* be one of the signs of the apocalypse," she joked. But it wasn't mean-spirited. She looked pleased, actually. Proud, almost.

Almost like I was becoming a man before her very eyes.

But I'm not so sure, Gentlemen. Was my newfound willingness for commitment just a symptom of recent loneliness? A drowning man would swear he'd rather be burned alive, and vice versa. Or maybe it was just peer pressure? It's not just my ex but many, many friends who are finally getting hitched. Was I just feeling the clock run out?

Questions questions questions.

What is clear *is* that I have no answers. And that I can't *ever* imagine being right for your Organization. And that I can no longer care. It's wearing me out.

So, here is the real reason I'm sending you this letter: I'm begging you to forward this letter to a different, but equally exclusive, club: The International Society of the Honest. I know you

have connections over there, and I fear—with your Organization no longer an option—it's the only respected group that's left within my reach. If nothing else, I figure this embarrassing letter should qualify me for their (candid) candidacy.

Sincerely,

Dave Mondy

P.S. I have included the promotional T-Shirt that you sent along with your invitation. It is too tempting to wear it, thus passing myself off as amongst your ranks, and that's bad karma I don't need.