

Why Women Moan in Bed

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“You remember Emily.”

A declaration rather than a question. Emily stands in the doorway of Dr. Robinson’s office and watches as he darts a glance from her to the woman sitting across from his desk—his girlfriend, that new professor from the English department. At least, Emily thinks she is his girlfriend.

Or something. Maybe not *girlfriend*, a word that sounds silly for someone with fine lines around her eyes and the puffiness along her jawline that women her mother’s age all seem to have.

“I’m throwing in the towel,” her mother told her the last time she was home, explaining why she was no longer coloring her hair. “I’m waving the white flag. Look at me. Gravity is winning on all fronts. It seems ridiculous to keep up the fight.”

Emily had laughed at her mother’s witticism, but it had made her sad, too—not the notion that her mother is aging, which is, after all, obvious and expected, but the idea that her mother is aging because she is allowing herself to, giving up her toehold in the immutability of things.

Of course things change. Life moves forward whether you want it to or not. Her father’s death when she was eight. Changing schools when she and her mother moved to a smaller apartment on the other side of town.

But her room at home is, even now, exactly as she left it in August—a colorful outpost of pink and green striped wallpaper and posters of singers she no longer listens to.

As it will be when she finishes her first year of college and moves back in for the summer, taking up her job selling peaches at the local orchard and working as a waitress on the weekends somewhere.

Dating Cory again. Maybe. Probably. If he’s dating someone else he hasn’t mentioned it—no sly texts dropping a name, no whiff of another girlfriend in their infrequent phone calls. His Facebook status still says single.

How did people know things before Facebook?

Dr. Robinson’s girlfriend nods and says, “Yes, of course. Your little helper.”

A dismissal rather than an acknowledgement. Emily bristles.

In a way, though, it's true. Without her help, Dr. Robinson would never get any of the reading assignments posted properly on Blackboard. If she hadn't offered to scan the articles, the class would have had to continue checking out the few dog-eared journals from the library circulation desk, a practice more annoying than quaint.

The English professor girlfriend—Dr. Gramble? Dr. Graham?—lifts a stapled sheaf of papers in the air and says, “Here.” For a moment Emily hesitates, unsure if she is being spoken to.

“Thanks,” Dr. Robinson says, and with a start, Emily crosses the distance and takes the papers.

“Enjoy,” the girlfriend says with a smirk.

No, not a smirk. Something less sardonic. Something knowing and solitary. Wistful.

The entire transaction takes less than a minute and Emily is on her way. Before she leaves, she sees that a cigarette is suddenly scissored between the English professor's fingers, and as shocking as that is—someone smoking inside an office building!—what she remembers later are the manicured nails, the silk blouse buttoned at the wrist.

Almost noon, and Emily decides to go ahead and scan the article before heading to lunch. This time of day her dorm is relatively quiet. Most of the serious partiers, the ones who crank up the music and skateboard in the halls, are still asleep and will be for another hour or two. Everyone else is in class or chipping away at their tuition with campus jobs—wiping down tables in the cafeteria, washing up test tubes in the biology department.

Even the better jobs—helping a professor index his manuscript, showing prospective students around on Bulldog Days—are nothing more than indentured servitude.

Dr. Robinson's so prickly and fussy with the computer that Emily uses her own scanner and laptop in her dorm room when she posts the weekly reading assignments. She counts her time walking to and from Dr. Robinson's office as part of her work hours—not amounting to much money, but enough to pay for an occasional meal off campus.

Actually scanning the articles and posting them takes even less time, but Emily fudges the numbers slightly by opening the entries on Blackboard and reading them as soon as she posts them, to make sure they are legible.

Usually Dr. Robinson hands her a bound journal with a sticky note marking the pages to post, but today he's printed something off the Internet. She's given up trying to convince him that anyone who knows enough to Google an article can learn to hyperlink to Blackboard as well.

As she unstaples the three sheets of paper and places the first page on the scanner, she takes note of her fingernail polish, black, eaten away at the edges. Five minutes later, she

sits back to read the posted article online.

Copulatory Vocalizations of Female Primates.

She reads the title again.

Well. That seems random. Or rather, excessively specific for an intro psych class. The textbook chapter on human sexuality is four weeks away on the syllabus, too—though Emily has already skimmed through it. No surprises, just the usual survey of normal sexual practices and the non-judgmental nod to everything else. Not really that much more detailed than what she had read in her 9th grade health class—disappointingly so.

But this.

Female primates. There's something jarring about thinking of herself this way. Not just the primate part—but being called *female*, instead of girl or even woman. More formal, or more removed from how she thinks of herself. More like a bug under a glass.

The tone of the article doesn't help, dry and professorial. Emily is halfway through the first page before she is certain that *copulatory vocalizations* refers to the noise women make during sex.

Women, not men. Compared to women, men are almost silent.

How could she not have known this?

On TV and in the movies, sex is usually athletic and noisy—moans and groans and sometimes shouts—men as well as women. Hollywood fiction? Apparently.

The rest of the article speculates on the reasons for the discrepancy between men and women and between humans and other primates. In other female primates such as bonobos or macaques, male potency is affected by female vocalizations—the noisier females have more successful couplings and more pregnancies. The biological imperative for making noise seems clear.

Among humans the reasons are cloudier.

Emily scans the rest of the article but returns to the first page, like someone who trips over a stone and goes back to search for it, only to stumble again.

It's as startling the second time she reads it.

All these women—the girls in the dorm, the women at church back home, even the new English professor girlfriend draped over the chair in Dr. Robinson's office—are all privy

to this information, perhaps firsthand.

Her own firsthand experience is limited to backseat fumbblings with Cory and one hurried episode in his room when his parents were out to dinner with friends.

And that time she had wall sex with a junior art student after the dorm Christmas party—but he isn't a *relationship* so he doesn't count. Does he?

She didn't mind losing her virginity—if anything, it was a relief, like tossing out some unsuitable gift foisted on her by a disagreeable relative. *That* was done; she didn't have to worry about it anymore.

But with the sense of relief came a disappointment that surprised her. She wasn't the first girl Cory had ever slept with, and she had expected him to be...well, maybe it wasn't fair to have expectations of Cory. Her real disappointment came with sex itself. All those romance novels, those TV shows, those movies, those stumbled-upon Internet porn videos—even as they had laid bare the mechanics of the thing, what they hadn't shown her was how lonely it was, how self-absorbed her partners would be, how the chasm between their pleasure and her lack of it was too large to navigate.

Or almost. Pressed against the wall of her room by the junior art student, his breath hot in her ear, she had shivered and parted her knees, an ancient, jolting desire startling her and speeding her heartbeat. Someone—herself, perhaps—gave a low sound like a moan.

Nothing that followed came close to that first rush—not the groping that felt almost obligatory, the one-handed unzipping, the pinch and pull and heaving that was, in the end, as boring as every other time with Cory in the car.

She and the art student readjusted their clothes and separated almost without words. Twice since then she's seen him across the commons but has had no particular need to wave or speak. She hardly knows him.

Benefits without friends.

Now she thinks of him again, or more specifically, of that involuntary moan—the only one she can ever recall.

The wall. The tickle in her ear. The pleasant, distant fear of being discovered if her roommate opened the door. Two beers at the party beforehand. What was it? If she can sort out why she had moaned, she might be able to recapture it—this time with Cory if they date again this summer.

Homework.

* *

“What’s this?”

There it is again, that tone of faint disapproval. Walt Robinson closes the email on his phone and sets it on his desk before looking up. Cynthia is holding up a sheaf of papers between her thumb and forefinger.

“I can’t see it,” Walt says, and Cynthia turns her wrist so that the papers drape limply over her wrist.

“Copulatory Vocalizations of Female Primates,” she says with the same whiff of disapproval.

“For my intro psych class. Required reading. My student aide is coming by to pick it up to post it.”

“Seems rather off topic,” Cynthia says, flipping back the first paper. “For an intro class.”

It’s not her smirk or even the fact that she’s right—that the article is too technical for his class—but her slight emphasis on the word *intro* that rankles him. An *intro* class, full of 18 year olds too busy texting each other to pay attention to his lectures. An intro class taught by grad students and lowly assistant professors. If he gets tenure next year he can throw away the cadged together lecture notes and ridiculous PowerPoints the dean insists on when classes are large enough to need the auditorium.

“Not off topic,” he says. “Sex and psychology go together.”

“So do sex and literature,” she says, smirking broadly, “but my department head would never let me get away with posting this as required reading.”

Walt thinks of several responses, none of them witty or catty enough to justify the energy. He waves his hand dismissively instead.

Cynthia laughs out loud.

“Really,” she says, “did you even read this?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“No, seriously. Did you?”

“Do you think I’d assign an article I hadn’t read?”

Even to himself he sounds petulant and fussy.

“Well,” Cynthia says slowly, settling the paper on her lap and lifting her hand to her hair, tucking a stray white-blond curl back behind her ear. In the weak morning sunlight, her skin is pale, the tips of her ears, her nose, tinged pink, like a rabbit. Walt follows the path of her fingers as she slides her hand to her collar and fidgets with the button.

“What are you saying?” he says, pulling his eyes back to hers. “That I’m lazy?”

“You aren’t the most energetic person I know,” she says, still toying with her button, glancing away toward the door, as if she is planning her exit.

“Even last night?” he says, trying to be playful. She turns her attention back to him.

“Especially last night.”

“Oh!”

That’s a surprise, and a stinging one at that. The arousal he had felt watching her finger her hair, her collar, evaporates.

Walt hasn’t known Cynthia that long, just since the beginning of the academic year. They met at a faculty mixer at his friend Jeff’s house—a shabby three-story clapboard duplex in the graduate slums along Prospect Street. In the crowded back yard, Cynthia had parked herself in a lawn chair next to a tin bucket of beer and wine coolers and looked, Walt noticed, like a character who had wandered into the wrong story—her short linen skirt, her gauzy blouse, even some sort of ornament in her hair a contrast to the slumpy jeans and retro tees most of the other guests were wearing.

He told her as much as he leaned down to pull a beer from the ice.

“That’s the best you can do?” she said, arching one eyebrow. “A snarky comment about how I’m overdressed?”

She wasn’t seriously annoyed, he could tell—maybe even a little flattered. He offered her his beer and she shook her head, pointing one hand to the cigarette she was holding in the other.

“I never do two things at once,” she said, smiling as if she were thinking of some secret joke. “My attention wanders too easily as it is.”

It felt good to flirt again. Walt spent most of the evening circling and returning to where Cynthia alternately smoked and nursed some lurid colored drink. When he told her that he was newly divorced, she said, “Who isn’t?”

A cryptic remark, he thought later. He should have asked her more about herself.

He called her for coffee the next week and they agreed to meet at the new place on Temple Street that partnered with the university and gave discounts to faculty. The day was hot and the inside of the coffee shop was muggy, but the constellations of small, round tables and chairs strung out along the sidewalk were already occupied by students. With a sigh, Walt found an inside table by the window and waited.

And waited. When Cynthia hadn't shown up in 15 minutes, he was irritated enough to go ahead and order without her. When she still hadn't shown up by the time he finished his espresso, he was genuinely angry.

"I'm so sorry!"

She was suddenly there, tipping a shopping bag into the empty chair, shoving her hair from her face with a grand gesture.

"What are you having?" she said, glancing at his empty cup and then whirling away to the counter without letting him answer.

He didn't have time for this. When she returned with her coffee he'd tell her he had to go, that he'd already been here quite some time.

From where he sat, he watched as she shifted from one foot to the other, her head tipped up to look at the marquee. When she leaned against the counter to talk to the barista, Walt noticed that her skirt—maybe even the same one she had worn to the party—rode up her hips and curved snugly around her rear.

He continued to watch her as she carried two espresso cups back to the table.

"I bet you want to leave," she said—preventing him from doing just that. "I would, if someone kept me waiting."

"Well, no," Walt lied, somewhat mollified. "I haven't been here that long."

"I was heading out the door when my ex called," Cynthia said, scooting her shopping bag out of her seat and sitting down. "It took me forever to get away."

To his surprise, Walt felt a surge of jealousy.

"You talk to him often?"

Cynthia took a sip of her espresso.

“My ex? I talk to *her* almost every day. She calls to let me know how the dog is doing.”

“Well!” Walt said, flabbergasted. “Imagine that. Shared custody of a canine.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Cynthia said. “We weren’t married. And I hate that dog.”

“But you said—“

“We were together for a year,” she said, finishing her espresso and pulling out a pack of cigarettes from her purse. “Oh, shit, can I smoke in here?”

“Uh, I don’t think so. So you weren’t married—“

“Oh, yeah, I’ve been married. Twice. Don’t ever say I’m not an optimist.”

Whatever lingering irritation Walt felt with Cynthia wafted away. Cynthia the possibly bisexual divorcee was far more interesting than Cynthia the merely tardy English instructor.

Over the next few weeks they fell into an easy rhythm of coffee afternoons and occasional dinner outings. Someone gave her tickets to the symphony and she called him at the last minute to go. One weekend they rented a Zipcar and drove down to Bridgeport to a pricey two star restaurant he had read about. When they ended up in bed at last, Walt realized that this had been the real destination all along.

At least for him.

Cynthia remained a mystery. Not sexually. Sexually she was quick to direct him, to stroke his cheek until he dipped his head just so, to position his hands or nudge him back or forward with her hip, her knee.

But as a person she remained a folded page in a journal. A question asked was usually a question dodged. One night as he fell asleep, Walt realized with a start that he knew almost nothing about the woman in bed beside him. But did he really need to? When he woke up the next morning, he had already forgotten the question.

“What was wrong with last night?” he says as Cynthia smooths her hands over the paper on her lap.

“I didn’t say anything was wrong. I said you weren’t very energetic.”

“Sounds like a criticism to me.”

“Just an observation.”

“You sure?”

Now it’s Cynthia’s turn to look annoyed. She frowns and shifts in her chair.

“I’ll come back later when you’re in a better mood.”

“I’m not in a bad mood,” Walt says, blanking his expression and struggling to keep his irritation out of his voice. “You’re the one picking a fight.”

As he speaks, he already knows that Cynthia will deny it. This more than anything about women drives him up the wall—the passive-aggressive way they lob grenades and then duck and pretend they are mere passers-by in someone else’s battle. Meredith had been the same way—blowing him apart with her disappointment.

“I don’t fight,” Cynthia says on cue. “I observe.”

She waggles her eyebrows at him suggestively and in spite of himself, Walt laughs.

“What are you? Sherlock Holmes?”

“Indeed,” Cynthia says. “For instance, my power of deduction leads me to conclude that you haven’t read this article.”

So much for levity. Walt feels his hackles going back up.

“I have,” he says with some heat. In fact, he’s read only the summary. What does it matter? None of his students will bother to read it. He posts articles on Blackboard because it looks good to the tenure committee, not because he believes any of the barely-out-of-high-school kids sleepwalking through his intro psych class really want to learn anything.

“You’re phoning it in,” Cynthia had observed early in the semester when he complained that teaching bored him.

“Why shouldn’t I?” he retorted. “The students are.”

Cynthia holds up the article and says, “Let’s put you to the test, Dr. Robinson. According to this article, why do women make noise during sex?”

“Are you serious?”

“I knew you hadn’t read it.”

“Why don’t you tell me, then.”

Cynthia makes a show of examining the paper.

“Here it is. Researchers speculate,” she reads, “that because the majority of women climax before intercourse, they vocalize *during* intercourse out of boredom, fear of injury, or to increase their partner’s pleasure.”

Cynthia puts the paper back on her lap and says, “Why are you smiling?”

“Because,” Walt says, “it just proves what I’ve always said—that women are manipulative, even in bed.”

To his surprise, Cynthia flushes visibly, the pink tips of her ears becoming brighter. It’s rather appealing, Walt thinks, the way she isn’t able to hide her emotions. One of the things he likes about her, actually. How he can read her. How transparent she is.

Not so mysterious after all, despite a few missing details about her past.

“That’s your conclusion?” she says, her eyes narrowed, and he shrugs.

“It’s obvious, isn’t it? Most women finish up first and just want to hurry things along and get it over with. What did you say? They’re worried about getting hurt? They’re bored? Not you,” he says, grinning. “You want more, not less. More energy? Wasn’t that what you said?”

She slips her hand in her pocket and he knows she is feeling for her cigarettes.

It’s a habit Cynthia said her girlfriend drove underground—objecting to the expense more than the smell or the health hazards.

“It doesn’t bother *me*,” Walt told her the first time she smoked in his apartment, feeling magnanimous, victorious. She was, after all, in his bed now.

In his bed, despite her ex’s attempts to lure her back. He knew. Once he had borrowed her phone and saw a text flash across the screen before he could dial.

Call Olivia today.

“You have a message,” he said, handing back her phone, but Cynthia glanced at it, grimaced, and handed it back.

“Not interested,” she said, and Walt felt a wave of triumph.

They’ve never talked about her sexual history, not since that first night at the faculty mixer. Normally Walt is fairly direct about things, honest, saying whatever crosses his

mind. *Blunderbuss*, Meredith had called him.

So his willingness to wonder about Cynthia's girlfriend without confirming anything surprises him. *Olivia*. It's enough to know the name that appears at least once a week in Cynthia's email inbox.

If he snoops when he's at her apartment, it's only in self-defense. She probably does the same to him.

She's right about one thing. He should have read the article before choosing it as this week's reading. Where is it from? Some Australian university? Maybe the results reflect a cultural bias—certainly the women Walt knows intimately haven't been noisy in bed. Not Cynthia, for all her boldness, and certainly not Meredith.

More likely, he's right about the manipulation. Women who moan know exactly what they're doing. And he doesn't sleep with women like that.

Perhaps he should look for a grant to do his own study. He smiles to himself at the idea. If he doesn't get tenure next year, he might consider it. Possibly. What a lot of work, though. Just finding the money is daunting.

But the research itself would be easy. Hire some post docs to create a list of questions—maybe even replicate the same Australian survey—and have them fan out across campus for starters. Limit the sampling to people under 30, name it *Copulatory Vocalizations of Young American Women*. Something like that.

He could test the waters by giving it as a project for his intro psych class to do—extra credit, or a final exam. Or give it to his student assistant, the cute little redhead who helps him out with the computer stuff. Emma. No, Emily something or other. Who even now appears at the doorway, exchanging a look with Cynthia, the way women do.

"You remember Emily," Walt says—with the false bravado of a tourist pretending to understand the tribal dances performed for his amusement.

* * *

Cynthia was drinking her second cup of coffee when her phone chimed.

Sherry. Probably calling on the way to work. In the few seconds between confirming her guess by glancing at the screen and opening the connection, Cynthia pictured Sherry behind the wheel of her patrol car, her gray uniformed elbow jutting out the open window.

“Where are you?” Cynthia said by way of greeting.

“On the Interstate,” Sherry said. “Listen.”

The rush of traffic replaced Sherry’s voice—it would be like her to hold the phone out the window—and Cynthia said, “I need to get ready for work.”

“What’d you say?”

“I said I need to get ready for work. I’ve got to go.”

“Did you think about it?”

“The trip?”

Over the traffic noise, Cynthia heard Sherry snort.

“What do you think I mean?”

“I already told you. I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

Looking around for her cigarettes, Cynthia felt a surge of panic. Where were they?

For a moment she thought Sherry might have hung up and she was both relieved and disappointed.

“Are you still there?” she said, her thumb poised to tap the connection shut.

“I’m here.”

“Well, I have to get ready for work,” Cynthia said.

“Yeah, you told me.”

“Okay, then.”

“Yeah,” Sherry said, her voice suddenly free of the traffic noise. She’d either rolled up the window or gotten to work by now.

Cynthia took the phone away from her ear to turn it off when she heard Sherry’s voice again, distant and tinny.

“Listen,” Sherry said, “you got the email with the details, right?”

“Lots of them,” Cynthia said, standing up and walking to her bedroom. She had a pack of cigarettes in her jacket pocket, she was pretty sure.

“Well, you know how Olivia is,” Sherry said, laughing. “You say you want information and they flood your inbox. It’s a good deal, though. St. Petersburg is supposed to be really pretty. It would be fun.”

Cynthia patted the pockets of her jacket hanging in the bedroom closet. *Nothing*. She was sure she had bought cigarettes yesterday. She had a sudden image of paying for them at the local convenience mart and leaving them sitting on the counter.

“Look,” she said, “I have to go now. I’m meeting someone for lunch.”

The silence on the other end of the line made her stomach hurt a little.

“I’m not making the reservation until tomorrow,” Sherry said at last. “If you change your mind.”

The phone went dead.

Cynthia met Sherry two years ago on a cruise in the Bahamas, a gift she gave herself after her second divorce. A lesbian friend suggested Olivia, a travel company that catered to women, and at the time, Cynthia had seen it as a haven, a place where she wouldn’t have to posture the way she found herself doing around men.

What she hadn’t expected was to start a relationship there. Her first serious crush in school had been on a girl in her chorus class, but she had dismissed it, covered it over with so many layers of denial that when she found herself making excuses to spend her free time with Sherry on the cruise, she was more startled than anything else.

They were mismatched in many ways. Sherry was in charge of campus security at a small college in upstate New York. She spent most weekends helping her father and uncle on the family cattle farm or working security at local soccer games or concerts. When she wasn’t working, she was busy remodeling her bungalow near the campus.

Cynthia lived in Brooklyn until she was a teenager, owned not one but two complete sets of Shakespeare’s plays, and knew nothing about cows except that the hype about Kobe beef was completely overblown.

Three months after the cruise, Cynthia moved in, played house, and finished her dissertation. It felt, at the time, like a hiatus from real life, and that sense, more than anything else—more than having a degree in hand and an offer to move to Connecticut to teach, more than missing the camaraderie of people who liked to talk about literature, more than the various annoyances of small town life—ended the thing.

Sometimes she missed the easy way she and Sherry had lounged around in their pajamas all day on Saturdays, or the marathon cooking sessions that filled their freezer with homemade spaghetti sauces and chicken casseroles, or the noisy, exuberant, all too infrequent sex.

But at the end of the year she was ready to move on.

“I can only focus on one thing at a time,” she told Walt the first time she met him, and it was true.

Now here he is, pissing her off with his easy pronouncements about women in bed.

If Sherry had driven her crazy by filling every free moment with motion and action, Walt is the opposite—indolent to a fault, and worse, oblivious to it. A lazy teacher. A lazy lover. A lazy thinker, defensive, quick to judge. His easy dismissal of the research findings, for instance. The way he is unaware of anything outside his orbit.

“It just proves,” he says, “what I’ve always said—that women are manipulative, even in bed.”

And there it is—the annoying rock in the shoe, or rather, the unspoken bedrock belief of most men, and even some women--that control is what women seek above all else.

That idea explains so much, actually. Why the Bard’s strongest women are schemers, for instance. Why some women tell researchers that copulatory vocalizations are conscious, purposeful.

“You remember Emily,” Walt says, as if he can read her mind.

If Cynthia has ever seen Emily before, she doesn’t recall. She looks like most undergraduates—slightly tousled, brow furrowed, clueless.

It’s an uncharitable description, Cynthia knows, but she’s feeling cranky now and is ready to leave. As Emily crosses the distance and takes the article from her, Cynthia sees Walt smirking.

“Ready?” he says as Emily’s footfalls echo down the hall. He stands and grabs his jacket from the back of his chair.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Cynthia says. She looks up. “About lunch. I have stuff I need to do.”

He’s instantly put out, she can see that. Once he has a schedule or a plan, he likes to stick to it. Cynthia teased him once about his lack of spontaneity. He shot back that he valued

consistency, thank you very much, and what was wrong with that?

“Suit yourself,” he says, not bothering to hide his irritation. He follows her down the hall, breathing harder than he needs to.

She’s already walked away—is twenty feet to his left—when he calls out, “What about later? Are you coming by tonight?”

The thing to do would be to tell him the truth—that she didn’t know until now that she has been looking for a reason to leave.

That she’s been ignoring the significance of her silence in his bed.

That she and other women moan and shout and whisper terms of endearment or encouragement because otherwise they will disappear, like someone who is leaving, who has already left.

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