

Illustration by Mary Radice!

By Heather Draughn

I am a woman of the nineties. Women my age are more knowledgeable than our mothers were when they were our age. We know self-defense tactics, we carry little condom cases in our purses, and some of us can even change flat tires. But even with all of this, it is sometimes difficult for us to face the truth.

Take me, for instance. I didn't want to face the truth of what was happening to my marriage. But it nagged at me until I couldn't avoid it any more. I finally realized I had to stop pretending a chilly Thursday night last April.

As usual, I was rushing home from a day of classes at Eastern State. The evening traffic was enough to make the Pope curse, but I managed to get home before the credits rolled on my favorite talk show. Oprah was chastizing some brother with a curl and chintzy jewelry about his boasting about his many infidelities. He claimed he loved his wife but sometimes he just needed "somethin' extra." Of course, the well-endowed hostess and the many sisters in the audience were outraged, and they let him know about it. Finding this amusing, I smiled as I poured salt into the boiling pot of water.

Then the wall mount rang.

I stared at it as it kept on ringing.

It could be Isley calling to say he might be a little late. Or it could be Keisha asking what I was planning to wear to the Nightlife. Maybe it was Marvette calling just to say hello, and that she'd see me later at the club.

"Hello?"

A pause, then the expected dial tone.

"Dammit!" I slammed down the receiver and took a long breath.

The voiceless caller was really wearing my patience thin. I kept telling Isley that we needed to change our number because this person could be another Son of Sam. Being a typical man, however, he called my concerns "a woman's hysteria," and told me to chill out.

His attitude locked my lips because I never mentioned the calls to him again.

I tried not to let the phone call distract me from my dinner preparations, but it hung in the back of my mind like cobwebs. By the time Isley came through the front door of our apartment, the hamburger was done, and the noodles were firm enough for eating.

Looking at his handsome dark face and thick build made me appreciate my womanhood.

"Hi, baby," he said, kissing me.

"Good day?"

Isley shook his head. "Naw. But I'm not gone let it worry me. Baby, it's Thursday night. Y'know what that means. That sauce smells delicious," he said, of the simmering spaghetti sauce thick with green peppers and oregano.

Isley was an eighth grade math teacher at one of the district's worst schools, East Street Middle School, affectionately called "East of Hell" by faculty and students. It



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was the academic battleground for pre-teens of the Fog, Cortex Park and Logan Place—ugly blemishes on River City's claim that you could walk the streets at night.

"Want to talk about it?"

"No," he said, as he peeked at the noodles. "It will just lead to a fht."

"We won't fight."

"I know we won't because we not gonna talk about it. Okay?"

"Well, can I say something?"

He shook his head.

"Why not?"

Isley laughed as he unbuttoned his dark blue rayon shirt underneath his leather vest. "I know what you gone say, Gatina. You gone say how much you hate that I work there, that every morning you get worried up when I leave the house."

"It's true. I mean, baby, the Board was really impressed with you. Hobbins Junior is the best school in this city, this country. And you turned it down? Can you imagine how good that would look on your resume?"

"Stop, Gatina."

"But Isley..."

"Gatina!"

"I'm just scared, Isley."

"Don't be, baby. Sometimes you just have to go with your gut. Not a day goes by when I don't think about becoming a statistic while trying to teach those kids that y equal x. Shit happens, Gatina, and

there's nothing nobody can do about it."

Undressing, he walked out of the kitchen to the master bedroom to take a shower. I warned him that dinner would get cold if he took too long.

"Start without me."

I wrinkled my nose at the idea of eating alone again. Lately, I had been eating many lovingly prepared meals alone because something more important called him from the table—like Centavis, his frat brother and football buddy wanting to catch a game on the bigscreen TV at Shakey's Sports Club. Or some brothers from the old days of Eastern State grid-iron could call up and suggest drinks and pool at Shakey's.

I was determined to make this Thursday night our night, so I picked up the phone to call either Keisha or Marvette until he got out of the shower. As I put the phone to my ear, I heard a woman's voice on the line:

"Sometimes Brian, I just don't know what to do with you. You know that she's going to be there. Nobody misses the Thursday night Theme."

"I know that, Sweetheart. But it's a risk that I'm willing to take."

She sighed. "I don't know, Brian. What if she sees me? Then what? Are you finally going to tell her?"

"But she won't," he said. "With that crowd, you wouldn't be able to find your shadow. So don't worry. I'll just say—

hold on. Gatina!"

I nearly dropped the phone.

"Yes!"

"I smell something burning in there!" The garlic bread was still in the oven. With trembling hands I quietly replaced the receiver to the mounted cradle on the wall. Feeling faint, I leaned against the refrigerator to keep from falling.

"Gatina?"

"O.K.!" I called out, my voice all shakey.

"I got control of things."

After a few minutes, I heard the shower. Isley was singing "Hey Love." I slid into the chair at the table and picked at the plastic fruit setting, in the middle of it. I just sat there for almost an eternity, my mind blank, my spirit running on empty.

Wearing his purple and black polka dotted robe and a pair of black slippers, Isley sat down to a Heineken with his meal. He didn't stop humming until he noticed my silence.

"What's wrong? Upset about the garlic bread?"

I remained silent.

"I'll still eat it. Charcoal is good for you, I've heard."

"What would you call eating burnt garlic bread, Isley? A risk, maybe?"

Isley stopped twirling the sauce-soaked noddles around his fork. "Is this a trick question?"

I shook my head.

"I mean you always talk about taking risks, you know. So wouldn't you consider eating burnt garlic bread a risk?"

Isley was silent.

"Baby," he said in a low voice. "Eating burnt bread is not risky."

"Or do you mean, not risky enough?"

"Gatina."

"Do you love me?"

"What is with you?"

"Do you?"

"Of course."

"I want to hear you say it. How hard is it? I love you. There I said it. What about you?"

"That is kindergarten shit you talking, Gatina. You know that I love you. If not, I wouldn't have married you."

"Kindergarteners know nothing about love between a man and a woman, a husband and wife."

"I didn't mean it like that."

"I know what you meant, Isley."

I left him sitting alone as I showered and changed. By the time I slipped my hosed feet into platform shoes, I had convinced myself I was being paranoid about the telephone call. My husband, the man who promised to love, honor and cherish me forever, last Valentine's Day could be planning a rendezvous with another woman. To accuse him was absolutely ludicrous, and I refused to waste another million brain cells on the idea. Didn't I just hear that man say he wouldn't have married me if he didn't LOVE ME?

Besides, the TNT and Keisha and Centavis were waiting, so there was no time to dwell upon the possibility that my

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