

stuff isn't in my head at all. I am so sick. I just need.. I hear them in the house, Oh god, I hear them. Mommy get Seneca. Please. Oh god. No.....ya know, just like they told us, Don't Do Drugs.

ONE

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I'm just meant to be alone. No, seriously, as in "without a mate"- like, the salt shaker you keep on the kitchen counter even though you broke the pepper shaker years ago, but don't have the heart to toss out that salty little sweetie. Or the single white sock you have in your bottom drawer, that sock, it used to have a life partner, I promise, and that pair of socks used to be your absolute favorite ones to wear to bed when it got really cold and you needed a warm pair to wear to bed. But the awful washing machine devoured the other one and now you just have one. That's how alone I'm meant to be- a sock with no mate. Okay, so uproariously funny I'm not, but I try. A for effort, okay? Now, bear in mind, this inability to couple isn't for a lack of trying. It really isn't. Let's see. This whole problem began, I suppose, when Todd first left me. Let me fill you in on Todd a little. We met towards the end of college. We started dating. I liked him. He seemed to like me. He got accepted to medical school. I dropped out of school so we could survive while he was in medical school. I worked 14 hour days while he played doctor and then he finished school. And then I came home one night from work and he was packing suitcases and he proceeded to tell me that he was leaving me. And that he did. Said that after everything he had come to the realization that he didn't really know me. Well, gee whiz, do you think that might have something to do with all those 17 hour days spent at the hospital while your wife was working to pay the bills? I dunno, that's just a guess. But, I'm not bitter. At all. So, after the appropriate period of grieving my dearly departed husband had passed, I started dating again. Quite unsuccessfully, I might add. Let me just fill you in on a few of the particularly tantalizing highlights. There was the guy who was already married. His wife walked in on us having dinner. Could have been worse. She called me some very unpleasant names, and I'm thinking, good grief, am I supposed to google marriage records before the first date. Then, let's see, there was the one who neglected to mention that he had a chronic mental illness and when he stopped taking his meds he suddenly thought he was Abraham Lincoln. No, really, I'm not kidding. I wish I was. He was better looking than Lincoln, though.

And um, then there's a whole line of ill-fated first daters. I've been thinking about compiling a "best-of" collection of lines after the first date. A kind of "greatest hits of why I think you're lame and don't ever want to go on a date with you ever again but let me tell you in a stupid but nice way." "I really think we'd be better as friends." I don't want friends, I have friends, I want a boy-friend. "I'm just not ready to make a commitment right now." I'm not asking you to marry me, I was just hoping we could go eat dinner again. "You're haircut makes you look a little like a...like a...how do I say this in a nice way...like a lesbian." That's funny, because your head makes you look a little like a jack-ass. You can tell that my viewpoints on dating are really filled to the brim with sunny optimism. I mean, frankly, I run home every day just to check to see if I've received a new e-mail from those friendly folks at e-Harmony, letting me know that they've found the perfect match for me- the perfect match being of course a serial killer or perhaps another dead president, or you know, someone wonderful like that. Sometimes I wondered if I should rent out a billboard, just so I could plaster my face on it- include a snappy slogan, something like, "hey hotties, want to meet a nice, unsuspecting girl, date her a coupla times and then make her feel like the world's biggest idiot? You do? Well, just call, 718-229...yeah, well, we'll leave it at that. I mean you seem

like nice people, but trust only goes so far. Hmm..that might be a tad long for a billboard. But anyway, so I'm basically thinking that I'm destined to be the pepper shaker forever, with no salty sweetheart and then, as luck goes, I meet Marty. Not from an on-line dating service, not at a festive singles mixer, but, um, I meet Marty because of ice-cream. Ice cream. I'm in the check-out line at Lucky's and Marty compliments me on my ice cream selection. It was Ben and Jerry's Chunky Monkey, in case you're wondering. Fantastic stuff. Banana and chocolate and...okay, so, Marty engages me in some witty repartee regarding my frozen dessert tastes and proceeds to follow me right out of Lucky's. Now, of course, I'm thinking with my phenomenal luck with the gentleman, Marty is most likely a crazed axe murderer and I'm going to be chopped to death in the Lucky's parking lot and instead of getting to eat my delicious frozen treat, Marty's going to take me home and Bar-be-que me. But, um, Marty, didn't do that. We stood in the parking lot and talked for probably an hour or so. And this whole time, I'm thinking, wow, this is so not like..a guy. I mean, my experiences were probably a little slanted from ex-hubby on down, but this guy he just, he was interested in what I had to say, and so we just talked, and it was, uh, really, really nice.

So, by the time the conversation is winding up, I'm thinking, just be happy you got to talk to a nice guy, maybe it'll serve to improve your faith in the masculine gender a little, but then, I find myself suddenly exchanging numbers with him. And of course, I'm thinking, wow, here we go again, and he's never going to call anyway and then...two days later he does. And the next weekend, I find myself letting Marty take me out to dinner. And it's like, wow, this guy appears to be *more intelligent* than a cucumber, he isn't revolting looking, I'm not detecting any apparent craziness and yet we're going on a real date. And, the thing is, folks, we had a really nice time. We did. It was like we'd been whisked back to the friggim' 1950's or something, the way he's opening the car door for me and all this stuff, but for once, I guess I just turned off that little voice in my head, and well, I just let myself enjoy it. And then, the next week, Marty arrived at my apartment, axe in hand, dressed in his mother's clothes, and tried to kill. And I lived to tell the tale. No. That's not what happened. Would make a good book, though. What happened was eight months passed and Marty and I were still dating. To the extent that family had been met, and I sort of let him into my life a little. And the more time passed, the more Todd, the evil ex-hubby faded into the dark recesses of my noggin, and the first daters were more like a funny bad dream than anything else. I guess, the thing is, I'd convinced myself that I didn't really deserve someone was decent, really decent, you know? A man who treated me with respect and wanted to be my partner. And a little part of my brain started to wonder about kids...I mean, could I be a mother? Marriage? Once-burned, does she walk the aisle a second time? But, I mean, I didn't push, I didn't want to take for granted what Marty and I had, you know? And you can never quite tell where things are headed, I suppose. Like, I started to feel sick in the mornings. I would wake up, literally soaked in sweat and nauseous, and I would go visit the great white porcelain temple, but, um, there wouldn't be anything to throw up. And I'm thinking, yeah, no, no, no. This is not so good, folks. This could be very, very, bad. The pepper shaker is so not ready for a little mini-pep to suddenly pop out of her cavernous top. And so, I go right back to Lucky's and buy one of those little strip things, and I go home and I do what you do with them, and as I am waiting the longest twenty minutes of my life, I'm thinking, do I call Marty, do I not call Marty, what in the hell do I do, right? And so, with my hands shaking, and here I am not over-dramatizing at all, I read the little strip thing, and, um, there's a little blue minus sign. And that little blue minus sign, means no baby pep. Hm, so I'm thinking, it's a really long flu. And when I talk to Marty about it, he tells me I just need to drink lots of water, eat chicken noodle soup, all that, and that I'll be as good as new in a week. But in a week, I'm worse. And in two weeks, I'm even worse. I'm hot and sweaty all the time, and my body is hurting. And I'm thinking, one I'm going to sue the hell out of the at-home pregnancy test company and, two, being pregnant feels like you're going to die. And, uh, Marty had to go out of town for work, and so, I decided I really needed to go to my doctor, because, at this point I needed some killer antibiotics or something, and so, I went to the doctor. And I remember sitting in the waiting room, just freezing, with a blanket wrapped around me, and, um, as soon as the doctor sees me, she doesn't even take me into the exam rooms, instead, out of nowhere, it feels like, I'm being taken over to Mercy- she's saying my fever is 104, and that I'm dehydrated, and on, and on, and on...*this is all just one big blur at this point. And if I could have, I would have made some really obnoxious joke about how this was the first time Marty had let me down, because apparently I have the birdy-flu or some crap and he's out of town on work.* Great. And, uh, they get me over to Mercy and I just remember sleeping. Really sleeping. It was the next day when I woke up, and the nurse immediately calls for my doctor, and she gets there pretty fast, but as soon as she walks in the room, her face is just strange, and now I know it's the bird flu for sure. And she sits down, and she takes me hand and she tells me that I'm not pregnant. No. And that I don't have the avian flu. But she does crack a little smile when I ask her if

that's what it is. But she says that it isn't. Instead, she, um, she takes this kind of long breath and there's this sort of extended pause where I could hear this loud buzzing sound in that hospital room and I wished more than anything, right then, at that moment, that Marty was there in the room with me, but then, um, my doctor tells me that I've been infected with the HIV virus. That's right. The HIV virus, the one that causes AIDS, the one that, um, you don't recover from. And then after that, she kept saying a lot of other things, but for some weird reason, the buzzing in that hospital room had gotten so loud that I couldn't hear anything she was saying, and instead, it was just her mouth moving and it was like, for a few moments, time had just stopped. The one always had something to say, had nothing. Absolutely nothing. So much for salt shakers and socks, right?

So, huh, let's see here...that was about a year ago. You've probably guessed already, but good ol' Marty wasn't on a business trip at all, in fact, I really have no friggin' clue where he was, because he pretty much just vanished into the ether. Poof. And um, don't think I'm blaming him unfairly, because, not to get too personal or anything, but, he was it. Just him since Todd. And let me tell you, you don't get this from toilet seats or water fountains or bad tuna sandwiches. Instead, you get it when you're trying to connect with someone, when you're thinking you deserve to be loved. Here I was, thinking, I deserved that, and instead, apparently, what I deserved was a really complex terminal illness that eats away at your immune system until your body had nothing left to defend itself with and then you die. It's really that simple. Don't wanna mince words or anything. New billboard idea- once again, my snappy mug up there, looking over the highway, but this time the slogan reads: "AIDS: it's not just for gay men anymore." In one of the other support groups I went to, I learned that the statistics for women are rising, now, it's like one out of every four new infections or something, and I'm thinking, wow, that's great, because like, now I'm part of a bigger sisterhood or something? Right. I never even thought, you know? I mean, what you have? I could count the number of men on...but, um, I guess that doesn't much matter, because it didn't take 5 or 10 or 15 or 20. It just took one. Just one time of not thinking. Sometimes at night, I just lie awake, wondering if I can feel it in my body, consuming everything up like a parasite, and I think, if I ever saw Marty again, what would I say to him, but then, I realize, I just don't have anything to say. If I wasn't funny before, well, I'm downright morose now. Terminal illness has a funny way of doin' that to you. I try to talk loud and make jokes...but, uh, the truth is...I'm not feeling very brave at all. In fact, for the most part, I'm terrified. Because, if I was alone before, well now... New e-harmony dating ad..."just hold her hand one more time..." Right. You go through all this mental acrobatics too, ya know? What if I hadn't married Todd? What if I hadn't dropped out of school? What if I'd just stopped dating and become a nun? What if I hadn't decided on Chunky Monkey that night? What if Marty and I... What if? What if? What if? What if? What if I just do what I can between now and...well, ya know. It's strange sometimes to consider what the world will feel like when you aren't a part of it anymore...it just keeps spinning and spinning and spinning. It just goes on, like the salt shaker without the pepper or the sock without it's mate. Just like that.