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Foreplay with Nicole Kidman

When Eli gets home from the office I am waiting. I hand him one of those gold-embossed black leather notebooks into which I have scotch-taped a series of quotes from the latest issues of *Good Housekeeping*, *Us*, and *Rolling Stone*, all of which have Nicole Kidman on the cover touting both her new movie and her latest triumph on Broadway, a role she describes in *Rolling Stone* as “a far far better thing than I’ve ever done before.” I found these magazines on the floor under our bed, hidden behind the satin dust ruffle of our ruby-toned satin and velvet bedding set.¹ I have to admit it’s a bit unfair of me to torment Eli with his magazines like this, particularly given how we met.² But it’s not just me but my unborn daughter I have to think of. I have had to take defensive action fast and this collection—*The Best of Nicole Kidman in Her Own Words*—is a battle waiting to be won.

¹ The set is currently on sale at Victoria’s Secret, where we registered for our wedding five years ago. It’s on page 30 of the current catalogue, and comes in navy, bone, hunter green, gold, and black, as well as ruby, with certain pieces unavailable in gold.

² We met when Eli was an opera-loving first year law student at Cornell and I had recently appeared in an undergraduate production of *Così Fan Tutti* at Ithaca College. I sang the part of Dorabella, the one who is first to succumb to the sneaky attack on her fidelity. The Ithaca Town Courier said I imbued the role with considerable charm. It was my fantasy that an audience member would write me a letter or send me flowers backstage and we would begin a torrid romance. Eli did neither; but he ran into me three months later when he was doing an internship at the criminal defense clinic of the Legal Aid Society of Greater Ithaca, which handled misdemeanor charges. I had been arrested for shoplifting two magazines from Dubin’s Drugstore and was threatened with expulsion from the college because of it. I wasn’t really shoplifting the magazines; I had just hidden them under my shirt while I was waiting to pay for them because I was afraid I might run into somebody I knew. The magazines were called *Gentle Strokes* and *Bottom’s Up* and they were the kind of magazines purchased mostly by men in raincoats and adolescent boys. I was loitering near the checkout counter with them waiting until the poker-faced redhead had no other customers; I was terrified that she would go on break and old Dubin himself or the cute guy from *Psych* 101 would take over.

Wordlessly I hand Eli the notebook as soon as he's settled in the reclining chair with a glass of Merlot. I sit opposite in a straight-backed chair, watching his face as he turns the pages. I know exactly what is on each page: first page, Nicole on sex: "It's very interesting—sex. People are fascinated by it." Second page, Nicole on the recent success of her performance in *The Blue Room*: "I was gob-smacked by it all."³ Third page: Interviewer: "Do you believe fidelity is important?" Nicole: "I do. In a relationship—yes. Yes, I do."⁴

By the fourth page, I can see Eli is getting really mad.

"What the hell is this?" he asks me, his normally mild hazel eyes blazing at me from behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Well, since you're so in love with Nicole, I thought you'd like to have this personally selected collection of her wit and wisdom."

"I don't believe you. If this is the first trimester, what's the rest going to be like?"

"I will tell you," I say. "First you use the mother-of-pearl made-in-Paris opera glasses that Aunt Tzipora, may she rest in peace, gave us as a wedding present to get a real serious, scholarly look at Nicole Kidman's ass. Then you spend the rest of the play looking through them at all her other parts, salivating over each one. And

I've often read accounts by men about how embarrassed they were as teenagers buying such magazines; it's almost become a separate genre for these male authors, right up there with first sexual encounter: buying their first condoms, their first porn, even sometimes the first time they buy tampons for their first girlfriends. But nobody ever talks—much less writes—about how embarrassing it is if you're a female who likes to read these things. In fact, if you're caught, you're basically abandoned by your sisters—who say this stuff degrades women. So no wonder I was surreptitious. I explained all this to Eli at the clinic, who took me seriously and didn't make any funny remarks about my choice of reading material. Best of all, he got me off; and when we went for a celebratory lunch of Tofu Delight at the Moosewood Cafe, he said he thought he knew me from somewhere and it turned out to be from that production of *Così Fan Tutti*.

³ The interviewer subsequently asked, "What does 'gob-smacked' mean?" To which Nicole replied: "Blown away."

⁴ Portions of the article that had to be cut for reasons of space included the interviewer asking Nicole what fidelity might extend to if not a relationship, and Nicole's answer: "Well, you know, like my bank, for example. Recently I was unfaithful to Chase. I used the ATM machine at Citibank, and that was a lack of fidelity to Chase. But that's not what I'd call a relationship, even though it's strictly speaking a *banking relationship*. In that context, fidelity is not so important."

now—to add insult to injury—you say that maybe, just maybe, you want to name our daughter Nicole.⁵ Why don't you go the whole hog and just take Kidman for her middle name. That has a nice ring to it, don't you think, Nicole Kidman Abramowitz?"

Eli opens his mouth to speak and I hold my breath. If he says, "Are you finished?" I think we will be. I don't know what I'll do. But instead he says, "Darling, let me get you an ice-cold lemonade." He knows enough not to ask me to have some wine with him. At least he's paying that much attention. I stand up and reach for the book where it lies, face down and broken-spined on the table beside him. "You sit down," he says.

By the time he comes back in the living room with the lemonade, I have taken the "Best of Nicole" and hidden it away behind our twelve-volume set of Grove's Musical Dictionary. Taking Volume One of Grove's off the shelf and then putting it back reminds me that one of my professors at Ithaca was asked to provide an entry about Georges Bizet, which he had me write. That in turn reminds me that I do have some abilities after all. Between that and the lemonade, my mood improves and soon after Eli makes a toast to Baby Tzipora, he and I have moved from the living-room to the ruby-toned satin and velvet bedroom.

As the insert with Aunt Tzippy's binoculars reads, "*Optical performance relies on the successful balance of a number of factors. When each factor is optimized, the result is an instrument with outstanding visual performance.*" "What are you thinking?" Eli asks me afterwards.

"Nothing," I say. Actually, I'm thinking about raising our child together.

When the *Rolling Stone* interviewer asked Nicole Kidman her view of family life, she replied, "To quote Shakespeare again, it's the worst of times, it's the best of times — and for everything there's a season."

⁵ Nicole was the 29th most popular girl's name of 1998 in the United States. It's from the Greek and means "Victory of the People." How about victory of the stupid people? Victory of the tasteless People? How about victory of the People who read *People*?