

Meg Larson

Something Like That

for Dave

Later he would remember sun-dried tomatoes in a sour vinaigrette, and the cozy way she laid her fingers on his arm as she told him she was having an affair.

"He's so spiritual," Leslie said with a heavenly light in her eyes. "Unlike you, Jeff. You—" her green eyes narrowed, "—you eat your breakfast cereal with a serving spoon."

What could he possibly say to that? It was an old complaint, the thing about the size of his spoon. How she linked that with spirituality was beyond him. Lately she had developed a divine sense of herself after spending a month of Saturdays serving in the downtown soup kitchen, along with the other touchie-feelie types in her church.

She stretched her arm across the tiny restaurant table, stabbed a slick tomato on his plate, stuffed it in her mouth, and swallowed. She prattled on about an upcoming church retreat.

He managed to drink his way through the meal, filled his mouth with blood red wine every time a question—who, where, how long—threatened to slip through his lips. He hoped she'd keep the details to herself. He wasn't ready to think of her naked and sweating with someone else.

For dessert she ordered a vanilla bean gelato and decaf coffee.

"God is love. It's that simple," she said in her best breathless hippie-chick voice. "When you open your heart and spread love, you're doing God's work."

What do you spread when you open your legs, he wanted to ask but forced his tongue tight against the back of his teeth. First words, then tears. He had never had trouble crying. He could see how it would go and fought against the unraveling. He breathed hard through his nose.

In the car, on the drive home, he finally sputtered: "I had no clue."

"I know." She said cheerily. "I've been discreet."

In front of the bathroom mirror she fussed with her hair for a full ten minutes while he sat on the trunk at the foot of their bed and watched as she repeatedly tucked and untucked the same two

strands of streaked blond hair. Behind the ear, in front of the ear, behind again. She pulled the cinnamon silk shirt from her dress slacks and patted her belly.

"I ate too much." She made a bloated face, stuck out her tongue, then reached for the dental floss.

He studied her stockings feet.

He wondered, was it his turn to talk? What was he supposed to say? Is this the time to start the crying and the begging? He could feel the blood thumping through the vessels in his neck the back of his skull, above his right brow. He pressed a thumb against the bony edge of his eye socket and tried to come up with an ending. Any ending. He didn't have the imagination to make up something that would either cheer or comfort him. He feared he was caught in this pose forever, couldn't see beyond it, couldn't see his way through it. There was only this one long shuddering moment and the quake under his breastbone.

"So..." an elongated sigh. It was the best he could do. His disappointment with himself continued to grow.

In the mirror she cut her eyes at him, then flicked a simpering smile in his direction.

"Whatever you want is okay, Jeff. You're the one who's hurting right now," she said between tug of floss.

"I want you out." He didn't know it until he said it and then it felt right so he said it again, rising up on two feet, catching her eye in the mirror. Louder: "I want you out of this house. Tonight."

"All right," she said and flashed him a look he was sure she meant to be sweet and accommodating, but somehow it didn't ring true. She didn't seem the least bit surprised at his request. He had the sudden feeling he had played right into her hand.

She yanked the floss, sliced the gum between two molars, and cursed. She spat loudly into the sink.

He plopped down on the trunk. His chest burned with wine and vinegar. Two fingers trembled. He couldn't feel his heart any more.

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She gathered her essentials: deodorant, shampoo, lipstick in a shade called pink grapefruit. She shoved a pair of jeans, two tee

shirts, and several pink panties into her backpack, and loaded a tote with paperback romances. She pulled a stuffed frog from her bedside stand and made its legs clap together.

"Ribit," she said, holding the frog in front of his face. "Ribit, ribit." The frog's legs kicked.

"Quit." He had the urge to push her away, could see himself grabbing the frog by its feet and smacking her with it, right on the top of her dyed blond head.

She dropped the frog onto the bed and took his hand between both of hers and drew it to her collarbone.

He yanked his arm away, nearly clipping her chin with his knuckles. She stepped closer, put herself in his line of vision, gave him a bubble-eyed look better suited to cartoon characters.

"I know you'll be fine. You're such a nice guy." She solemnly bobbed her head up and down.

"Right." He resented the condescending statements, the way she vacillated between teenager and adult. When had she become so silly, so inconstant? He couldn't reconcile the two: the girl playing footsy with a frog, and a thirty-six year old conducting an illicit affair.

"You will be fine. I just know it." She nodded dumbly as she said it.

"Go," he said and herded her to the front door, careful not to touch her. He slid the bolt in place before she backed out of the driveway.

In the kitchen, the microwave clock glowed nearly midnight. He noted she hadn't phoned ahead to find a place to stay. Apparently she had known all along where she was going.

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On the end table in the living room, the photographs lined up like tombstones, the frames silver and sloping. Wedding photos. The bride's flushed face, the country girl dress, the bouquet she later dried and stuffed into vases in every corner of the house. She looked like a bumpkin in her frilly get-up. The maid of honor, her sister, younger with curves, wore a similar outfit and managed to

look quite sweet. At the wedding, he danced with his new sister-in-law once, a fast dance, until Leslie broke it up. With one toss of her faux farm-girl hair, she had sucked the joy right out of the day. What was it she had said, something that made him feel like a bad kid, a horny bad kid at that. Her sister was nearly thirty, just a few years younger than Leslie. There had been nothing indecent about that dance.

He studied the row of pictures. The wedding, their banner moment as a couple, yet the photos centered on her. Whenever he was in a picture, he stood out like a sore thumb, just another useless appendage. Weddings were for brides, he decided as he pushed the frames face down, one at a time. He remembered how she fussed over the cakes (white, lemon, and a velvety chocolate), spent a solid month planning the presentation of an entire table devoted to cake. When she proudly trotted him over to the cake table, he was perplexed that she had cried big fat tears over that display. Several stiff white cakes surrounded the hulking centerpiece which was topped with an insipid bride and groom on a hay wagon. The smaller satellite cakes were connected by beige plastic bridges peopled with hokey farm figures. One plaid-wearing farmer leaned over the bridge rail, making Jeff think of suicide. Not his suicide, just suicide in general.

He opened the wedding album to see a smirking Leslie presenting her diamond studded ring finger. He shut the book and perched on the edge of the couch. He could cry now, and took a deep breath, prepared to cut loose, but somewhere between his heart and his eyes, the tears were lodged. He ran a hand from collarbone to jaw, trying to force the tears up his neck and out his eyes. He had missed the chance to cry at the restaurant. Now he wished he'd smacked her with the frog. Then she would've berated him, and he would've cried while apologizing. That's when he could talk, and think, and make sense of things. When he cried. Right now he couldn't cry so nothing made sense. Like thinking about suicide on his wedding day.

He had done that twice, in fact. The first being when the minister explained the origin of the phrase "tying the knot" and his mind had gone straight to "noose around the neck." Was that a premonition, foreshadowing, an omen? He hadn't thought of suicide since

then, hadn't remembered even thinking those things until now. They had a good marriage. They worked for the same company, had offices on the same floor. Everyday they carpooled. Everyday they ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner together. How many married couples could stand such togetherness?

It was a good marriage, he was sure of it. Only the last six months had been lousy.

At two a.m. the refrigerator startled him out of his funk with its noisy cycle of humming. He stared into the open fridge as if he could see the source of the noise. He saw the fat free milk vibrate before he grabbed a bag of peeled baby carrots from the crisper. His favorite snack. Of course he was hungry now. He'd had no dinner.

He slouched at the table and stared at the wall. A long low shelf of stuffed animals, mostly rabbits in bonnets and suspenders, caught his eye. He threw a carrot and nicked a bunny in the head. The carrot hit the floor and rolled away.

Six months ago she'd joined a church, St Francis Something Or Other. He called it the Church of the Sanctified Dipshits, and it was full of skulking rich guys on the make. He had seen that for himself and when he'd commented on it to a co-worker, the guy had given a wicked chortle and said, "Oh, you're talking about Saint Francis of Adultery. I've heard about that place. Keep an eye on your wife." And his co-worker had smacked him on the arm and winked.

At home he had repeated his friend's comment to Leslie and she'd given her typical giggle before saying, "Oh, I couldn't have an affair with anyone there. Most of those guys smoke." And she had laughed and tweaked his nipple. And then he had laughed. He had laughed it off.

Now, as he pelted rabbits with carrots, he realized for the first time, that was the wrong answer. What she'd said. She wouldn't screw around because they smoke. What she should have said, what he would have said in the same situation, was something else entirely. Because we're married and I love you. Something like that.

Yuk. He ran a fist over his forehead. What a clod.

They had True Love. That was what she'd said, in her ready-to-get-laid voice. In the beginning. They had met on a dinner cruise while putting around the harbor. His date was battling in the bathroom from the combination of sea sickness and narcotics, (she'd had a tooth pulled the day before) while her date was the dj for the dance portion of the cruise. After eating dinner, he'd gone to work.

They were both half pissed. Together they got toasted on raunchy tequila. She fiddled with his fingers and sang along with the songs. He said he liked a woman who wasn't too proud to sing off key. She said she liked a man who wasn't covered in hair like a rug. This, with a nod over her shoulder. During the fast dances, she rubbed her butt against his crotch, and blew kisses to the hairy dj who looked grumpy and unattractive.

He had never been so blatantly bad. He had never been the one to win the girl. Somehow he had always ended up with the shy, reticent types, usually chunky girls with bad perms and solid uninteresting lives. They were like pound puppies, so damn glad for the attention but skittish, forcing him to play the gentleman. These relationships had been perfectly adequate but not memorable. In fact it seemed he only ever dated one girl; she just changed names occasionally.

During one raucous fast dance, he kissed her neck and they headed out to the open deck where his date eventually caught him sucking on her ear.

"Nice one, Jeff," she'd said and puked over the side before staggering off in her fat black dress and matchstick heels.

Later, after he'd ditched his date, they met up in a parking lot and rented a waterfront room. From the first fingerful of pubic hair, he was hooked. She was bristly and sharp, the way he imagined pigs' tails if he were to hold them in his hand.

In the morning, he heard her voice stripped of alcohol and the background noise. It was like the best kind of come-on, delicate with just a hint of bawdiness. She could do amazing things with her voice.

Over his breakfast of apple pancakes he shyly confessed his lack of guilt at abandoning his sick date, then explained how they'd never been exclusive, commitment had never been mentioned, they had never even been in the sack. The justification left him glowing.

She spread peanut butter on her banana pancakes and said she forgot to mention that she lived with that guy, but she was mostly moved out.

He broke it off right then and there, left cash on the table and walked out the door. He was secretly proud that he had enough of a moral skeleton to pull off such a dramatic gesture. He would not sneak around or become a third party in any relationship.

When she completely moved out, she showed up on his doorstep in a cape with a plastic rose between her pointy little teeth.

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At four in the morning he went for a walk being sure to take the most canine-infested route. He wanted some noise even if it was just dogs. Sometimes he tried to guess the breed by the bark. All he saw with his penlight was the reflective lining of their eyes. Topetum, he thought as he named the glowing membrane. Something like that.

Somehow he was getting through the hours. They were slipping by while he was in la-la land, trying not to think about his skinny wife sitting on the lap of some golden guru. His thoughts were loud but unformed, the irritating drone of static, like the sound of an off-the-air television station. He remembered that from childhood, that scratchy hiss, Now cable kept people entertained twenty-four seven. Is that what happened in his marriage? Did he fail to keep her entertained? They had love, didn't they, or something like it?

At a convenience store he considered chatting up the clerk, a ripe thirty-something with sloping hips and a stained smock, She didn't look any happier than he felt so he bought the cashews without saying a word. On the walk back, he threw the nuts at the dogs, a treat for keeping his miserable company.

At home he showered, scrubbed his hair twice with strawberry shampoo, and trimmed his toenails. He stood naked in the kitchen as he steeped two cups of highly caffeinated Ceylon tea. He added copious amounts of sugar and a modest bit of milk. He chased the tea with a hefty swig of Kaluha.

He sat on his side of the bed and waited for the jitters to begin.

An hour later his heart knocked around in his chest and a light skin of sweat covered his back. His head ached. When he closed his eyes he could see a white branching of trees against the darkness. Somewhere he'd read this was the shadow of the network of vessels inside the eye. Everything was working. Heart, brain, kidneys. Right then he had to piss.

"My wife is screwing another man," he said aloud, just to say it. Just to hear it. Why couldn't he feel it, he wondered. Why didn't his body know that something in his life had just been crushed, had possibly died? Where were the tears that belonged to this grief?

He stretched out on the bed and dared God to stop his skipping heart.

He dared himself to go to work.

He counted forty-two rotations of the sluggish ceiling fan.

He hopped back in the shower.

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He drove the old Mazda into work two hours early. He had a key to the building, a key to his office, a key to the lounge. The perks of a programmer's job. It was a cushy position and he knew it. He could come and go, as long as the work got done.

In his office, he fidgeted, nervous and bereft. From the corkboard by his desk, he removed the single photo of her, taken on the day they demolished the little shed behind their house in order to build the gazebo. There she was in hiking boots and jean shorts with a faded pink tank top that laid bare her belly. She stood on her toes, a hammer on the downswing toward the side of the shed. The shed was metal, they hadn't really knocked it over with hammers, but she had thought it would make a good picture.

He liked the way he could see a line of her lower ribs and the bone of her knee cap. Before, he had admired that picture in the way he admired shots of supermodels, pretty enough to look at but no thought of the touch-ups involved. Now he saw pictures could be as deceitful as people.

He remembered the rest of that day when they tore down the shed. After the click of the camera, she had trotted off into the house. She had not offered one beer to any of his friends who'd been helping him out. He had to ask twice to get her to call in an order for pizza and she refused to answer the door when the delivery boy arrived. Then she said she wasn't hungry but took a paper plate and a slice of double cheese to the den and shut the door. All afternoon, he heard her in there, plunking around on the piano, playing silly seventies love songs.

He dropped the snapshot into a blank envelope, drew a jolly roger on the front, then stuffed it in a drawer. He felt his heartbeat in his neck, turned his head to get rid of the throbbing. No doubt she would show up at work. She could have the plague and she would still drag her sick self into work and spread it around. Her office was halfway down the hall. People were milling around now. He heard little clicking noises, the irritating slide of keys in locks, the sucking sound of doors being opened and closed.

He got his computers going then logged on to check his mail. He scrolled through the messages, found one from Leslie. His head gave a thump and he saw silver streaks. He closed his eyes until the flickering passed, but his stomach continued to cramp. Too much caffeine had a laxative effect on him.

Her mail had nothing in the subject line. She always omitted that and it annoyed him. How hard was it to come up with a two-word title to an email?

His fingers seemed too clumsy for the keyboard. The thudding of blood behind his eyes made reading difficult. The note was dated the day before. Probably she'd written it after the dinner, after he'd sent her packing.

He sucked in twice, tried to pull the air into his cramping gut.

This was it. This was where she said it was all a joke, a mistake, a symptom of a bigger problem. She'd had second thoughts. She'd end the thing with the other guy. She'd suggest counseling. He

would agree. Next year for their anniversary they'd take a cruise to the Bahamas and drink banana rum. She'd prance around in a pink bikini. He'd admire the view.

Hi Jeff!

Remember that little Italian place we sometimes go to? the one where the old guy plays the accordion? I can't remember the name (Guido's, Guiseppe's, Giovanni's???) but I think there's a coupon in the entertainment book for that place. Could you bring that to work tomorrow? If you don't want to look for it, just bring the whole book and I'll find it myself. Thanks a million!

Leslie

He could not quite laugh. He wanted to cry but he couldn't manage that either. He should be seething, irate, throwing a fit, having a conniption. He should be broken and bawling. All he felt was the disconsolate rumble of his gut and the annoying tick of a strobe light inside his head. Since last night's dinner, when she had dumped the news of her infidelity into his lap like a bowl of thick cold soup, he'd had a feeling of being in someone else's dream, a disconnected quality he found vaguely disturbing. The numbness was poor protection. Initially he'd be okay. Without it he'd feel worse. But sooner or later he'd end up miserable.

Last night, after she left, he had expected her to call, to talk things out, or just set up a time to get together. Maybe he just hoped she would call to see how he was doing. Maybe he wanted her to care a little bit. He wondered when she had last cared for him.

A few months into the marriage, she had said she didn't feel It. Love. She went to him crying big fat tears and whining about how the love was gone. He tried to explain that while love was constant, the adrenalin rush that accompanied new relationships wasn't. Love evolved over the course of a marriage. All that giddy hormone-driven desperation was not love but just a precursor to get the people together. To expect that to continue perpetually was adolescent bullshit. He said this without rancor or judgment.

It became a pattern. Every few months he sat her down and found different words, as if he hadn't just said the same thing, as if he hadn't heard the same complaint from her over and over. Each time she ceased her sniveling and stared at him with wet, vacuous eyes. Then her face—her pointy little hangdog face, he could see it now, not then—would mope around for weeks until, in an effort to break her morose mood, he would plan some romantic thing—Sunday brunch, a midnight drive, a weekend at some quaint B and B. Or he would buy her a gift, a journal with delicate stars across the bottom of each page, a tiny watercolor in a rosewood frame, a cashmere sweater. Only then she would perk up and say the love had returned.

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He couldn't get his stomach to settle. There were wet rings under his arms, his shirt collar stuck to his neck. He found a desk fan on the bookshelf and turned it on full blast into his face. He closed his eyes.

It occurred to him that he couldn't describe one good time. Sure, she did some nice things. She took her nephew to the science museum. She ordered flowers for his parents' anniversary. And she arranged his flight to Dallas when his brother had that accident. But she didn't go along. She hadn't been there for him.

In all those years there had been no secret looks, no midnight chats, no private jokes. So they had some good sex. She had thought love was a rush, a rapture. She wanted to sustain the romantic fervor. A feat he considered impossible, a notion he thought immature. He had always thought they had an ordinary love. He had felt secure in something. What exactly he couldn't say. How many times had he dismissed the changeable nature of her affection for him.

He remembered the bad things, the irritations, the aggravations of two years of marriage. The way they behaved when they met was almost shameful. He had stopped telling the story long ago. What had there been between them? What had sustained him? Her song, that was it, although right now it hardly seemed enough. She could really sing although she pretended otherwise, only let loose her

voice when she thought no one was listening. Or whenever she sensed the end of his patience with her. When he was pitching in the wake of her swaying moods, she would start up a song, a husky blues that lifted his spirits or the purest lullaby to cradle him. It was a surprising thing that kept him guessing, made her seem mysterious, full of promising secrets, as if a better more harmonious person was hidden within her out-of-tune self.

Perhaps he had only been in love with her potential. Once at an estate auction, she had pointed out a garish piece of furniture and made up a comic, convoluted tale of acquisition to go with it. She encouraged him to do the same with the next monstrous item. Eventually they had created three generations of a fictitious family. At the end of the afternoon, he had the satisfying sense of having built something with her.

There must be other moments like that somewhere in his memory. He just couldn't get to them right now. He couldn't figure it out. He couldn't keep it straight. He needed to cry. Tears had never healed his heart, but they had certainly cleared his head.

For now he would bumble along until he could cry and figure out the whole mess. He would stop looking for answers, stop trying to induce the tears the way he had always tried to induce her love.

He moved the box of tissues from the desk to his bookshelf.

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He pleaded a migraine to explain his grievous appearance. No one in the lounge bothered him with chit chat. They left him to steep his tea in peace. He flipped through a *Business Week*. Leslie's squeal made him jump.

"Hey, there you are, Jeff. I sent you an email. Did you get it?" She had on slacks and a sweater with tiny pink flowers embroidered around the cuffs. Her hair was pulled back in a hot pink scrunchie, making her face seem perfectly triangular. She looked like a college girl on co-op.

His watch beeped and he removed the Earl Grey tea bag from his mug. His shaking hands sent tiny splatters over the counter. He looked for a sponge to wipe it up.

"Did you get my email? Did you find the coupon? Did you bring the entertainment book?" She sounded so childish. When had she begun to use that baby-girl voice? Why hadn't he noticed it before? He remained mute, ran the sponge under the water at the sink, squeezed it several times.

She followed him from sink to counter as he wiped up the dots of tea and rinsed the sponge.

"Can I have it? Will you bring it tomorrow?" She went to touch his arm with her slim pink nails, but he twisted out of her reach. The movement set off sparks inside his head.

"Go," he said as he leaned against the counter, his voice run-down and weary. The conversation was as disappointing as the email. He wanted something from her, but he didn't know what. I can't talk to you."

She put on a pout. "But I want—."

"When you have something to say about our marriage, I'll listen. Until then, stay away from me." He pointed to the door. He could walk away, but it was more important that she leave, that he make her leave as he had the night before.

She looked at his face, then the door. She crossed her arms over her chest, shoved her fists into her armpits, and pushed out her lips. She burst into big fat tears. "This is important to me," she sobbed and her face looked ugly and mean.

"A coupon?" he said. "You'll cry over a coupon but you'll eat four courses and a fucking dessert after you tell me you've been screwing around."

She cried harder, the lines around her nose pinched and unattractive.

There were times, he thought, that tears were meaningless. He handed her a paper towel to wipe her face.