

Rusty Barnes

True Love

Matalia says she would walk over a bed of razor blades, eat the worm out of the apple, suck the marrow from the bone, all for me. That sentiment lasts for precisely six months, until our anniversary date, which I have prepared for as a man must with roses and perfume and picking up my boxers before she does. At Diva, a pretty little Indian restaurant, where five minutes before I had been nuzzling her hand over the table, she hits me with this sentence:

"We're just not simpatico, Charles." She looks out the front of the café. We're at an outside table, so I have an entire nighttime streetful of people with whom to share my ignominy.

"Wait," I say. "I take Pearly for walks and pick up her shit. How is that not simpatico? I know the kind of food you have to have when you're hung over. How is that not simpatico? How is two eggs sunny side up and cinnamon toast not simpatico?"

"It's just like you," Matalia says, dabbing at her mouth with a piece of bread, "to mix up one of the really kind things you do with something nasty."

"Dogshit is nasty." I'm drumming my fingers at this point.

"Oh Charles. That dog has done nothing but love you." Matalia bites the side of her finger and stares out at the McDonald's across the street, which is advertising a 99 cent value menu.

This is the way the conversation runs for a half hour, and we go home with uneaten entrees for an achingly painful night of me sleeping on the futon and her and Pearly on the bed. I'm just as glad in one way, because Pearly is sleep-flatulent and after six months I am not yet inured, still capable of being roused at 3 AM by a particularly potent dog-fart where Matalia will sleep on, snoring slightly. I am so blissfully in love with this woman I can't stand up; she doesn't fake orgasms, she doesn't mind my baseball card collection, she for godsakes came to meet my family and

wasn't totally weirded out. How could this have gone so wrong? Where did it go wrong?

Matalia, on being pressed, tactfully points to the day she caught me French-kissing Pearly as the beginning of the end. It was an innocent little thing, one of those moments every dog owner has when they are blissfully unaware of the divisions between dog and man, when that lifted-ear lop-eyed grin becomes a message not only of shared humor but of connection, and it's true, I opened my mouth and the dog licked me and Matalia saw it, and was not amused.

I would shoot the moon, mainline heroin, drop to my knees and profess undying devotion to Matalia. I would sing her name in scales in the middle of the night on Halloween if she wanted. I am more than forthright when I answer her questions and I have told her about other women and I have opened up scabs for this woman to peer into. I want to believe in us, I want her to know my innermost feelings.

I'll leave the damned dog alone, if that's what it takes.