

“Sunny Side Up”

I have a secret. I’m an asshole. It’s something I struggle with, being an ass and all, because I used to be a really, really, incredibly nice and generous, fun-loving guy. But all that changed after Sarah came into my life. I learned a lot from that relationship. They say nice guys finish last. And boy, are they right.

Sarah and I met at a wedding in Dallas over Christmas. She was nice, pretty and loved to country dance. I must have seemed nice too, because she gave me her number when I asked. I called her the next day, which is so unlike me, and we went out a few times before she headed back to LA. She was in town for the wedding and stayed to visit her family for the holidays. Sarah liked me. I could tell. For starters, she answered her phone when I called. Even after she went back to California, I continued to call. And she continued to answer. Besides, calls were free on my cell at night after nine. So call I did. A lot. I was bored. She was available. It was a match.

Three weeks after Sarah went back to California, I flew out to visit. Since I paid for my plane ticket I figured it was only fair that everything else was her treat. I even mentioned that to her during one of our conversations before I left Texas. She laughed and thought I was joking. I wasn’t. The day before I arrived, Sarah emailed me; said she was going to the store to pick up some snacks and asked what I liked. Score. I liked a lot of stuff. At 6’4”, 220 pounds, and thick, I had an appetite.

Dear Sarah, I like yogurt. But only Yoplait—fat free, but not light. I only eat Banana, Blueberry, Cherry and Strawberry. Don’t dare get Boysenberry or that Key Lime Pie crap. For breakfast I drink two, 12 oz. glasses of orange juice. Tropicana. No pulp. Calcium added. I have a pear every morning when I rise—Asian, not Bartlett. I like eggs and tortillas—whole wheat tortillas, not the flour kind. I like carrots and ranch as a snack. Get the Hidden Valley brand. Fat free, of course. Shiner Bock is my beer. And I don’t drink water from the tap. I eat meat and lots of sides.

The list went on and on about what I do and don't like. Sarah wrote back and said I was high-maintenance. *"Yeah, but the results are worth it,"* I replied. That line was very persuasive because when I arrived at her apartment that Saturday morning, her fridge was stocked.

"I got what you asked for," she said cheerfully as she opened the fridge—as if to prove she wasn't lying. "But I got Bartlett pears instead of Asian." She was hoping that was okay. It wasn't, but I really wanted some action that weekend so I shrugged my shoulders and said, "That's fine."

"The grocery stores are on strike," Sarah continued, "Produce is ridiculously expensive these days—that's why I got the Bartlett." I already said that it was fine. Why was she still talking about pears? "Asian pears are expensive!"

"Yeah, I know. That's fine." I was really hoping the conversation would end. It didn't.

"I mean, really, really expensive," she said. After a few moments of silence she continued, "They're \$2.99 each. EACH! Can you believe that?!"

Making that scrunched up face you do when someone says something that doesn't shock you, but you know they want you to be, I said "That's about right. I pay \$2.50 per pear in Austin." Sarah just stood there. Refrigerator door open. Jaw dropped. And speechless. She probably thought I was insensitive for asking her to buy me five. Eh. She'd get over it. Besides, I was the one who had to stomach that tasteless Bartlett crap.

After I hung my clothes up in her cramped closet, Sarah and I jetted to the local diner down the street for breakfast. I was hungry and really wanted to experience some authentic California cuisine. Sarah had the whole week planned out for us on a note card. After telling me the proposed itinerary, she asked if those plans were okay. Although I didn't hear, "Gettin' any" on there, I simply smiled and gave my usual response, "That's fine." I really wanted to go to Disneyland and Universal, but she said it

was too expensive to do all the touristy stuff. She didn't want me to be in sticker shock. Sticker shock? She was the host. Not me.

After breakfast, Sarah and I toured the Long Beach Aquarium then headed to Orange County to have dinner with her sister and the husband. They were nice. Sarah was really concerned about me having a good time. She kept asking me how I was doing. I was fine. Buzzed. Full. And totally fine. When the bill came, I continued talking to her sister. She seemed really into me too. And I don't think she was just being polite. We talked about Austin and work and weather out in LA. We talked and talked and talked. Even when I was tired of talking I found something interesting to say. I always do.

It had been fifteen minutes since the waitress dropped off the check and no one had acknowledged it. I wondered if the husband was going to pick it up. I mean, he *is* the guy. Then I thought Sarah would offer, being the older sister and all. Finally, the husband made the move. I could tell he was doing the math in his head because his lips were moving. Barely. But moving. While reaching for his wallet he looked at Sarah and asked if they want to split it. "Sure," Sarah replied instantly, "What's the damage?"

I was having such a great time. Everyone in California was so darn generous and nice. No wonder I was 33 and single back in Texas. For years I had been fishing in the wrong pond.

We got home late that night and I was beat. I had been up since four in the morning in order to catch my flight. There was only one thing I wanted more than sleep. And that was Sarah. She must have been feeling a little shy on our first night together because within minutes of being back home, she pulled out the sofa bed and started making it up.

"Thanks for a great night," I said while getting naked in her bedroom.

"My pleasure," she said.

Pleasure! Oh why did she have to say that word? I was going out of my mind. "You'd be a lot more comfortable in here," I softly said while nestling myself into the down comforter that graced her queen sleigh bed.

"You're right," she said as she walked into the doorway and looked deep into my eyes. "I put an egg crate under the sheets for you. It makes the sofa bed a lot more comfortable that way."

She was confused as to why I was in her bed. I was confused about a lot of things at that particular moment. And me being naked and in her bed wasn't one of them. Bumping me to the couch was not the southern hospitality I was used to. I was the guest. Guests get guest rooms. Not pull-outs in the living room. And guests get the girl. Disappointed, annoyed and in complete disbelief, I grabbed the throw-blanket off the end of the bed and tip-toed out. I couldn't sleep. And it wasn't because of the metal bar that dug deep into my back. After an hour of laying there and staring at the ceiling, it all became completely clear: Sarah was playing hard to get. Besides, who wants a girl who puts out on the very first night?

Sunday morning we woke to rain. It was perfect cuddle weather. Only problem was, I was on the couch. And Sarah wasn't. I would have crept into Sarah's room and climbed into bed with her, but I tried that already—in the middle of the night. I thought there'd be nothing better than for her to wake in the morning, cradled in my muscular arms, tightly embraced. What kind of koo-koo puts a lock on their bedroom door? Especially when they live alone.

At half past nine, I got up and knocked on her door. "Wake up sleepy head," I said in a soft, playful voice. No response. I knocked harder. "Sarah." I waited for what seemed like eternity, then—bang, bang, bang! "SARAH! Are we going to church or what? Yo, get up!"

Sarah was a church person. Not me. I just pretended to be one. Girls like that trait in a guy. A few minutes later, Sarah opened the door. She was wearing grey flannel pajama bottoms and a pink

tank top. She looked cute. Not hot. Cute. I didn't fly all this way to see cute. I was hoping for some skimpy lingerie.

Church ended at noon, lunch at two. We had a whole afternoon to burn before our pre-planned evening event. "Want to watch a movie?" Sarah asked. Not really, I thought, I'd rather make one. The home-video kind.

"Sounds good," I replied. There was nothing out I wanted to see, so we ended up renting one and going back to her apartment. Neither one of us watched much of the movie; we were too busy locking lips. I was relieved that Sarah still liked me. She had been so standoffish since I arrived that I was worried that maybe she had changed her mind about me.

During one of our breathing breaks, Sarah said, "We probably should start getting ready for dinner. What time is your cousin supposed to arrive?" I have two cousins that live in California. One lives in the valley and the other lives with her husband in Camp Pendleton. I was really hoping to see them both, but Sarah said Camp Pendleton was too far of a drive, just for dinner.

"Seven. She'll be here at seven," I said while smoothing out the couch cushions.

"Then we should start getting ready," Sarah replied.

Get ready? I *was* ready. Men are born ready. Before Sarah spent the next half hour primping in the bathroom she decorated the coffee table all girly with wine glasses, candles, and appetizer plates. She asked me to help by slicing up some cheese for the hors d'oeuvre plate. I wasn't into cheese, but I was into Sarah, so I said, "okay." Even though I knew the living room is where she planned to entertain me and my cousin, I felt that the back patio was a much better choice. So while Sarah was doing whatever girls do in the bathroom, I took the liberty to move everything outside.

"Where'd everything go?" Sarah asked as she strolled into the living room with her hair and makeup finally finished.

"Outside."

"Oh, okay," said Sarah, a bit perplexed. "Um, it's cold outside. Why'd you do that?"

"It's not cold," I said, knowing very well that, to a chic, it probably was.

Sarah walked over to her patio thermometer, took a deep breath and said, "It's 55. That's cold. Bring that stuff back inside."

Who was the guest here? That's right, me. I was on vacation and I wanted to sit outside. "Go grab a sweater," I said. "You'll be fine." Sarah just stood on the porch looking at me. After what seemed like eternity, I broke the silence with, "What? We've been cooped up all day. What's wrong with wanting to sit outside?"

Sarah finally gave into my idea, yet she didn't take my advice. Rather than grabbing a sweater, she put on her North Face ski jacket and zipped it all the way up. I know she was trying to make a point. Then again, so was I. I had the feeling Sarah wasn't too happy with me. She'd get over it. All she need was time. And a big glass of red wine.

My cousin arrived half an hour late. Women—none of them can ever tell time. Cocktail hour got cut down to twenty minutes because my cousin was as winey about the weather as Sarah. Dinner was at a neighborhood brewery down the street, which I really liked. What I didn't like was what Sarah was wearing. It made her look fat. And she wasn't the least bit of that. I didn't want my cousin to think that I was with an unfit woman, so when Sarah returned from the restroom I made a comment about how her outfit wasn't that complimentary. At first I thought she was going to cry. Thank God she didn't. I hate it when women cry. Their mascara runs.

"Thanks for the advice," Sarah said with a crooked smile. She just nodded her head and didn't say another word the whole night. When the bill came there was that awkward silence. I felt a little weird that Sarah would be paying for my cousin too, so I pulled out my credit card and offered to pay

the tab. I figured, if the wine didn't put Sarah in the mood for our second night together, that my generosity would. Besides, I think I hurt her feelings when I commented on her frumpy outfit. Picking up the beer & burger tab was the least I could do. Though I had never planned on spending those extra 35.

That night was pretty much a repeat of the one before. The only exception, Sarah gave me a peck on the lips before she shut her bedroom door. As I lay on the sofa bed that night I thought about what I might have done to deserve the cold shoulder. At about two a.m., it hit me. Sarah was disappointed that I wasn't as assertive as I was when we first met. From here on out, I was going to take charge, and be the southern gentleman that my mom raised me to be.

I woke the next morning by clanking of pots and pans. Sarah was in the kitchen, making breakfast. Luckily, I caught her just in time. Sarah was whipping up eggs for omelets. As she reached for the jug of milk I said, "Oh, you put milk in your eggs?"

"Yeah, it makes them fluffy," Sarah said as she stood there with jug in hand.

"I don't drink milk." I know she was asking me to eat milk versus drink it, but milk is milk. And I simply don't like it.

Sarah put down the jug of milk then turned on the kitchen faucet to add water to the mix. "Yeah, I don't do that either," I said as I plopped down at her kitchen bistro table and propped my feet up on the glass top table. "Plain eggs are fine."

Sarah must not have understood what I meant by plain eggs, because two seconds later, she reached for the bowl of grated cheddar and jar of salsa. Fearful of what she'd do next, I jumped up from my seat, rushed towards where she was standing, and jettied out my hand. "Whoa!" I said, full of surprise. "I melt my cheese on top of the eggs, in the microwave, and put the salsa on the side."

Sarah just stood there. Frozen. I think she was embarrassed that she didn't know how to make eggs. Once the situation was under control, I returned to my chair and began reading yesterday's paper.

"You don't have today's edition by any chance?" I asked. After a few seconds of silence, I looked up from the paper to see Sarah staring at me. "What?" I asked. I know I'm extraordinary handsome and all, but come on, she still was going to have me around for a few more days. No need to get all goo-goo-gaa-gaa now. Besides, I was hungry.

"This is NOT a restaurant," Sarah said sternly as she threw the spatula onto the kitchen counter. Restaurant? Of course I knew this wasn't a restaurant. I'd have better service if I were at a restaurant.

"I like my eggs a certain way. What's wrong with that?" I said.

"You want to cook?" Sarah snapped from across the kitchen.

No, I didn't want to cook. I wanted to read the paper. Today's paper. Not yesterday's crap.

When Sarah came back from the restroom, she finished making my eggs the way I liked, put them on a big plate and immediately started cleaning the skillet. Good. I detest mess. Although, she wasn't really cleaning it right.

"You got any meat to go with this?" I asked.

"Nope," Sarah said, very matter of fact as she poured soap into the sink.

"Bacon? Turkey sausage? Anything? I thought I had that on my list. Didn't I? Guess you missed it."

As I was shoveling the food into my sexy-southern mouth, I could feel Sarah staring at me from behind.

"That's the serving plate you're eating off of, Carl. Not your plate. Those eggs were for the both of us!"

I apologized. Said I was sorry, that I didn't realize...blah blah blah...I even put my fork down while I was talking, just like my mom taught me. I wasn't sorry. I was hungry. She must have been hungry too

because after shuffling around in the fridge for a few, she grabbed the jug of milk and a box of cereal. By the time Sarah sat down at the table, I had finished my meal. I didn't want it to get cold.

"Hungry, huh?" Sarah said while tapping her foot on the ground.

I didn't know what she was getting at, so instead of trying to figure it out, I just asked. Which was a big mistake.

"I made *us* breakfast. *You* ate it. I then scrounged up something for me to eat and you didn't even wait for me?"

Hmmmm, she was right. I didn't. Oh well. I really didn't have anything to say to that, so I just shrugged my shoulders and told her the obvious, "you're right, I didn't. Sorry about that." I wasn't sorry. Not the least. Again, I was hungry. And I like my food hot. But apologizing was the polite thing to do. Sarah was a little more high maintenance than I expected.

On my last full day in town Sarah and I spent the day at the Getty, and then headed up to Yamashiro in the Hollywood Hills for a nice, romantic dinner. Sarah wasn't very talkative at the museum. She said she was just taking in all the art. But I could tell something was wrong. She wasn't her usual, cheerful self. And she definitely wasn't as affectionate as she was during our dates in Dallas over Christmas. If I was going to get any lovin' before I flew back the next day, something drastic was going to have to change. Every time I tried to hold her hand, she pulled it away. She said her stomach hurt. So what if her stomach hurt, her hand didn't.

By the time we arrived at Yamashiro that night it was almost seven. I hadn't eaten in hours, so I was starving. My usual meal time was six on the dot. I thought I had told her that. I asked if she had any snacks in her purse. Lord knows she carried everything else in there. Unfortunately, she didn't.

Yamashiro was nice. A lot nicer than I expected. It was a Japanese restaurant with all the traditional décor. It was perched halfway up the Hollywood Hills and overlooked the city lights. After

taking in the spectacular view for a few minutes Sarah and I went inside. Sarah had been there before so she started telling me the history of the place. I was more interested in the menu than what she had to say.

When the waiter came back to the table he asked if we knew what we wanted to drink. We didn't. So I requested more time. I opened the menu to the wine section and asked Sarah if there was anything in there that she had had before that she liked. Sarah reminded me that I didn't like wine; and while there was no cocktail menu listed, she pointed to the full bar, off to the side.

"This is a special occasion and all, and I want wine," I said. I'm not really sure why I said that, but I did. It sounded good, so I went with it.

After perusing the wine list, Sarah said, "Get whatever you want. I'm going to have a glass of house red."

"House red?" I said in disgust, not really knowing what *house red* meant, but pretending that I did. "It's a special occasion, Sarah; I want a bottle of wine. A bottle. Not a glass. A fresh, uncorked, bottle of wine."

"But you don't like wine," Sarah reminded me. "And I have to drive, so I can only have one glass."

"Sarah, honey," I said. "It's alright. I do like wine. Fine wine. Not the cheap crap." So I asked Sarah once again which bottle she liked. After a little back and forth she gave in and pointed out two options. They were only 34 bucks a bottle. Some of the cheapest on the menu.

"Hmmm," I said, perplexed by her response, "I'm more in the mood for a medium-priced bottle of wine." I let that sink in for a while then followed it up with what I've been telling her all night, "It's a special occasion. And I want to have a good time."

"I don't have a job right now," Sarah said. "I can't afford to pay for an 80 dollar bottle of wine." Why not, I thought. Her unemployment status didn't seem to keep her from picking up the tabs the previous days. Besides, how could she forget that I was the one who paid for the flight?

"Let's just ask the waiter what he recommends," I said.

"No. He's going to suggest an expensive bottle and I'm going to be embarrassed when I have to decline."

When the waiter came back, I asked him which bottle of wine he recommended. I even inquired about the really expensive *meeeeer-lot* in the second column, top right. "Merlot" the waiter said kind of snippy, "The *t* is silent." Sarah had corrected me on that one a few minutes before. Hmmmm, I guess, for once, she was right.

The waiter was an okay, nice guy. Mid-twenties. Good looking. Probably a want-to-be actor. After a few minutes of inquiring about different bottles he said, "Actually, I recommend this one," pointing to the cheap bottle that Sarah had wanted when we first arrived. I was surprised. Extremely surprised.

"Really," I said in bewilderment. "I mean, it is the cheapest one on the menu."

"Yeah, but it's the best wine for the price."

Price? I didn't care about price. After Sarah jumped into the conversation and Okayed the waiter's recommendation on the wine, he asked if we would like an appetizer. "Of course," I said immediately, "I'm starving. I'll probably have two. Can you give me some more time?" The waiter went away and I asked Sarah what she would like. Sarah said she wasn't very hungry. She wasn't feeling well so she wanted something light. "Not me," I said. "This Texas boy can eat! I'm thinking the Surf 'n Turf." I knew Sarah wasn't a vegetarian, but the second I told her what I was going to order, a look of disgust swept across her face. When the waiter returned, I ordered Sarah's entrée, then mine. Sarah wasn't

fond of me ordering for her. She said that she had her own voice. Of course she did, it was just squeaky and annoying at times.

"That's what real men do," I said, "Especially on special occasions."

"Not my men," Sarah replied. "And what's up with this '*special occasion*' crap."

Sarah seemed ticked. Bet she just needed more wine. More cheap-ass wine. Her stomach must have really hurt because she didn't say more than ten words to me all night. Dinner was delicious, and so was my double-decker dessert and three cappuccinos. I was having a ball of a time. I've never told someone so much about myself in one night. When the bill arrived we both just sat there. Sarah was playing with her napkin and I was swirling around the remnants of my disgusting wine. The waiter checked back three times to see if we were ready to pay. Since Sarah had yet to put down her plastic, the answer was no.

Ready to get back home and get it on, I told Sarah that we should probably pay up and hit the road. "Alright," she said, without reaching for her purse.

"How much is it?" I said while growing annoyed for the delay.

"I don't know," she said, "I haven't looked."

"We'll, maybe you should" I said after loosening my belt.

Sarah took a deep breath, flipped over the bill and said, "one seventy-five."

"Wow," I said. "That's a lot."

"Well, it would have been a lot more if you had ordered your '*medium-priced*' bottle of wine."

True. I couldn't argue there. "So," I said after a few more minutes of silence, "You want to split it?"

"Excuse me?" Sarah whispered. "Do I want to what?"

I didn't stutter. I never do. "Split it," I said one more time. I felt bad that the tab had gotten so high.

After a few deep breaths, Sarah said, "I don't go Dutch."

"Thank you, then," I said with a smile as I pushed the check towards her side of the table. Good meal. Great location. Barely palatable wine. It was a memorable night.

"My stomach really hurts," Sarah said as she pushed back from the table. "Excuse me while I use the ladies room." Sarah grabbed her purse and sweater and jetted down the hall.

Sarah was gone for a really long time. The waiter checked back several times to see if we were ready to pay the bill. I told him no, not yet. After about twenty minutes I asked the waiter, to ask the hostess, to check on Sarah in the restroom. That's when the hostess gave me a folded up napkin. It was from Sarah. On it she scribbled: *"You're an ass. Thanks for dinner. Goodbye."*

The cab ride back to Sarah's was really expensive. I planned to add it to her tab from earlier that night. When I got back to her place in Manhattan Beach my suitcase was on the curb and her place was locked. It was pitch-black in there and her car was nowhere in sight. I tried prying open the windows, but those were locked as well. For the next hour I just kept hitting redial on my phone but eventually she blocked my number. Then the cops came. Said I was on private property and that trespassing was illegal. I told them the short version of what happened and they were kind enough to give me a ride to the airport. At least someone in this town still had a heart.

It was after that fling with Sarah that I realized: if I want to find me a good woman, then I need to stop being such a nice guy.