

# Deviance

Jennifer McGaha

When I was twenty-four years old, I worked for a university-sponsored project studying the availability of services for emotionally disturbed adolescents in rural western North Carolina. Originally, I applied to interview kids in the study, and I completed the training to be able to administer the questionnaire. Ultimately, however, three other applicants were chosen over me. And then Sylvia, the on-site project manager, asked if I wanted to interview for the position of research assistant. This person would primarily help in the office, typing and filing and such, but would occasionally interview clients or service providers. I got that job because of my response to one question.

The job interview was in Sylvia's office, in an old, creaky house that had been renovated into the Haywood County's mental health offices. Sylvia sat at her desk, and I sat on the long sofa across from her while she asked me the usual questions, "Are you proficient in Microsoft Word?" "What about Excel?" "Are you available to travel?" "Can you work the occasional Saturday?" I had been reading *What Color Is Your Parachute?*, so we volleyed rapidly back and forth, she, the expert interviewer, I, the ideal interviewee, while Sylvia jotted notes on a legal pad.

Finally, Sylvia put down the note pad and leaned back in her swivel chair. Her long, blue-jeaned legs stretched across the area rug until her black boots scraped the hardwood floor. She stared intently at me over her red cat-eye glasses.

"Why do you want this job?" she asked.

I paused. That question hadn't been in my book, so I paused to consider what the correct response might be.

"Well," I said.

I was wearing a red cotton jersey dress that, I hoped, hid the fact that I was three months pregnant. I stared at the red polish on my toenails, and then I looked at Sylvia and said the first real thing that came to my mind.

"Because I am fascinated by deviance."

Sylvia smiled, a thin line of magenta lipstick streaking her wide teeth. She hired me the next day.

My job was not difficult. I answered the phone, entered data, delivered supplies to the regular interviewers, subbed for the front desk receptionist when she went to lunch. Every day, during my morning break, I walked from my office to Whitman's Bakery downtown for cannoli. Some days, I went back after lunch and ordered another cannoli, which I ate alone at one of the rickety tables in the back room of the bakery.

Sylvia and I quickly became friends, a sort of unlikely pair, the barefoot and pregnant country girl and the sleek city girl. She was thirty years old and, though not exactly pretty, sexy and chic. She was tall, over six feet, very slim and very smart. She had long red hair and wore jeans and high heels to work every day, and she kept a fifth of vodka in the bottom drawer of her desk.

We had all our weekly staff meetings at a hip Cuban restaurant in downtown Asheville. Every week, Sylvia ordered something different, shredded pork or whole braised chickens. I always ordered the same thing, black beans with plantains and salty Cuban bread. On the days when we didn't meet with the entire staff, she and I often ate lunch at her apartment above a hardware store in downtown Waynesville.

Sylvia's apartment was one large room with a massive ceiling, wide, pine floors, and large windows that she left open so her cat could climb onto the terrace to watch the people passing by on the sidewalk below. She made us sushi rolls filled with carrots and cucumbers and avocados and spread thick with umeboshi paste, and while we ate, we talked. I told her about my first husband, our two-year-old daughter, and our divorce, about my new husband and about my family who had lived in Haywood County for generations. She told me about her brother who was an actor on Broadway, her ex-boyfriend, her parents back in California.

Sylvia didn't want kids or a husband or a house with a yard. She had nude paintings on her walls, and she slept on a mat on the wood floor of her apartment. She was the first truly creative person I had known in my adult life. Later, after the research project was over, she would start her own sushi business and, later still, her own design business in San Francisco.

One day, several months after I began work, one of the regular interviewers was out of town. Sylvia asked me if I would like to do a psychiatric assessment of one of the kids in our study. He was sixteen years old and lived with his mother in a Methodist community near our offices.

"Sure," I said.

She handed me the thick questionnaire book, a set of #2 pencils, and the directions to Ryan's house.

"Good luck," she said. "He's been in a lot of trouble."

Ryan's house emerged as a dark shadow through the pines—heavy logs stained dark brown, a long, wide porch spanning the front. White dogwoods dotted the woods along the narrow driveway. When I finally reached the top of the hill, I parked underneath a poplar tree. I was seven months pregnant by then, and my belly pressed against the steering wheel. Gathering my supplies, I heaved my body from the car. Then I rapped hard on the front door, a dull, hollow sound. Silence. Smoothing the front of my long, white cotton top, I tried again. Finally, I heard footsteps, a gentle clicking on the floor, and the door opened. A middle-aged woman with hair dyed too dark for her skin appeared in the doorway.

"Hi," I said. "I'm Jennifer. With the research project."

"Of course," she said. "Come in."

She stood to the side, and I squeezed past her into the hallway.

"Ryan!" she called. "The lady from the college is here!"

Ryan wore faded jeans and a blue flannel shirt and socks, no shoes. He was thin and tall with sandy brown bangs that hung in his face. He held out his hand.

"Hi," he said, flipping his head to one side.

His eyes were light brown.

"Do you want to work in here, or would you prefer to be outside?" his mother asked me.

"What do you think?" I asked Ryan.

He shrugged, so I said outside would be fine. On the deck, I eased onto a deep, wooden rocking chair while he paced back and forth. My belly was heavy on my thighs.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” he asked.

“No,” I lied.

I tucked one swollen ankle under the other. My knit pants clung to the wooden seat.

“Shall we begin?”

He nodded and lit a cigarette.

“Do you ever ruminate?” I asked.

He paused in front of my chair.

“What is that?” he asked.

He blew a circle of smoke over his head.

“You know, it’s when you repeat things over and over in your head,” I said. “Like certain words or song lyrics?”

“Oh,” he said, resuming his pacing. “Of course.”

“How often do you do that? Once a week, three times a week, once a day...”

“All the time,” he said.

He finished his cigarette, stubbed it out on the porch rail, then tossed it into the woods. I checked the box beside “More than once a day,” then moved to the next question.

“Do you drink alcohol?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

He lit another cigarette. I checked “yes” and flipped my booklet over to the section on substance abuse.

“How old were you when you had your first drink?” I asked.

“Two,” he said.

Inside the house, the phone rang. He paused and looked toward the sliding glass door. A moment later, his mother appeared.

“Your father is on the phone,” she said.

He nodded at her.

“I have to take this,” he told me.

Ryan and his mother disappeared into the house, cigarette smoke wafting behind the closed door. I stood and looked into the woods. Through the trees, I could see the lake and in the distance, the giant cross mounted on the hill. Just beyond the hill was the church where my daughter attended preschool. On warm afternoons, we sometimes brought a picnic to the lake. We spread out a blanket and ate peanut butter sandwiches while a crowd of ducks and geese and an occasional black swan swarmed noisily around us.

When we were finished, we tossed our crusts to the ducks, and I pushed her stroller past the roses lining the pathway and read her the names on the metal signs next to the bushes—Royal Sunset, Dainty Bess, Bridal White, Little Darling, Pink Parfait. Then I unbuckled her from the stroller and lifted her so she could touch her nose to the petals, her damp, dark curls brushing my face, the air filled with the hum of bumble bees and the thick, heavy scent of roses.

Some days, I felt middle-aged. Other days, like today, high school didn’t seem so far away. When I was sixteen – Ryan’s age -- I used to wait until my parents were asleep, then pull one of the kitchen chairs over to the high cabinet where they

stored their liquor. Standing in the chair, I reached over my head and felt for the bottles. There were never more than three, probably the same three bottles that had been there as long as we'd lived in that house. My mom used the rum to make pound cakes, and my dad liked to occasionally pour Crème de Menthe over his Breyer's vanilla ice cream.

Still, I was cautious at first, and I poured only a tiny bit of rum in a glass and filled it with Diet Coke. Later on, I became bolder and started taking more, a Tupperware container filled with enough for me and a couple of friends, but I was always careful to refill the bottle with exactly the right amount of water. After a few times of this, the rum was watered down, so I decided to try the Crème de Menthe.

One evening, I took the entire bottle and snuck it under my jacket as I left for a party. At the party, I alternated shots of Crème de Menthe and Coor's Light. I drove myself home and made it to my bathroom just in time to be sick. All that night, I vomited a foul, foamy, green liquid. I was still asleep the next morning when my dad went outside to wash and clean my car. My bedroom was above the garage, and so, lying in bed, I heard my car door open, then slam shut abruptly. I threw on my clothes and ran downstairs.

"It seems something spilled in your floorboard last night," my dad said as I met him in the garage.

His tone was casual, but his jaw was tight. In one hand, he was carrying the empty bottle of Crème de Menthe. With the other, he passed me my yearbook, which, I just remembered, had been lying on the car floor. The yearbook had been white, but now the entire cover was bright green—vomit colored.

Late one afternoon, shortly after that incident, I jogged the six miles from my house in Illahae Hills to Mary Ann's house. Mary Ann lived by the country club, and her parents were always at the clubhouse having drinks and playing bridge with their friends. When I finally got there, I was puffing and sweating from running up the steep hills. Mary Ann was standing in her kitchen, leaning against the open refrigerator door.

"We're out of half and half," she declared, slamming the door shut with her leg.

She had a cigarette in one hand, a bottle of Kaluha from her parents' liquor cabinet in the other. I grabbed a cigarette from the pack lying on the kitchen table, and we headed to town, to the only convenience store that had cups that were big enough. At Fast Fare, we bought extra large fountain Cokes and a quart of half and half. We dumped the Cokes in the bushes outside the store. In the car, we opened the Kaluha and poured it into our cups, then added all the cream. Mary Ann started the car, and we headed to the forest.

The Pisgah National Forest begins just on the outskirts of town. The cops generally ignored our impromptu Friday night gatherings at Coon Tree picnic area or in the parking lot at the Looking Glass Rock trailhead. That evening, we were just going for a drive. It was completely dark by the time we reached the forest entrance.

Mary always had a joint tucked in a cigarette pack in her purse. As soon as we hit the forest, she reached behind her seat to grab her purse from the back floor, then swerved across the road trying to wrest the lighter from the plastic wrapping covering the cigarette pack. Then she pulled out the joint and tossed it to me with the lighter. Balancing the cup between my legs, I held the

joint between my teeth and lit it. Mary reached down and popped Madonna into the tape player and cut the car lights. There was a full moon. It shone through the trees and reflected off the white lines on the sides of the road. We flew around the dark curves, passing the joint back and forth, belting out “Borderline.”

But as soon as we sang them, the words were sucked out the open windows and into the dark night air.

I still had my back to the door when Ryan spoke.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

As I turned to him, a light breeze rustled through the trees.

“That was my dad,” he said, a cigarette already between his teeth. “He’s on death row, and he can’t call very often, so when he calls, I have to take it.”

A squirrel scampered down the porch railing, scattering a cloud of pollen. Ryan cupped one hand around his mouth and flicked a lighter with the other. Somewhere nearby, a woodpecker bore into a tree.

“That’s okay,” I said. “Should we continue?”

“Sure,” he said.

“Do you drink alcohol once a week, several times a week, once a day, more than once a day?” I asked Ryan.

“Every day,” he said.

He stopped at the railing just beside me and leaned with his back to the woods. I looked down at my list of questions. “Have you ever used marijuana?” “Have you ever used stimulants?” “How many times a day do you wash your hands?” When I looked up, Ryan was staring at me, his brown eyes filled with something indiscernible but not unfamiliar.

Except for my current husband, every single guy I had ever dated had those eyes. There was the violent man I first married, but before that, there was a greedy American Airlines pilot, a narcissistic frat boy turned real estate agent, a long-haired machine operator with a fondness for muscle relaxants, an arrogant ex-Naval officer who kept telling me how much he loved his ex, and a brilliant but deeply flawed coke addict named Matthew.

Matthew was irreverent and funny and daring. He had light brown hair, long in front and short in back, and he wore wire-rimmed glasses. A few years before we began dating, Matthew had written, “FUCK YOU BULLETHEAD” with bright blue spray paint on the side of the high school English wing. Bullethead was the name we commonly used to refer to our high school principal who, after that particular incident, quickly decided that Matthew was gifted enough to go to college early. So Matthew skipped his senior year of high school and enrolled in classes at UNC-Asheville. I was a high school junior, and he was finishing his second year of college when we started dating.

Matthew was always drinking something, and I was too—Long Island iced teas, vodka and grape juice, Everclear and fruit punch, tequila shots, citrus wine coolers, and Budweiser—sometimes all in the same evening. One night, when we were downstairs in his parents’ den watching TV, he pulled out a razor and a plastic bag filled with white powder from his pocket. He dumped the powder onto a mirror, then arranged it into two long, straight lines.

“Do you want to try it?” he asked, gesturing with the tip of the razor.

His neck was still in a brace from a recent accident. In a coke-induced frenzy, he had run his car off Toxaway Mountain one night. Now, he looked at me sideways, at an awkward angle.

“Sure,” I said.

Pulling a dollar bill from his shirt pocket and rolling it, small and tight, he leaned into one of the lines. I watched the powder disappear. Then he handed me the bill. I held it to my nose and breathed in hard and steady, the powder burning my nostrils and throat. My heart pounded. I looked back into the mirror. Two faces stared back at me, mine and Matthew’s, but I saw them blurred together. His fuzzy eyes over my nose. My chin below his mouth. His glasses resting on my cheeks.

Now, Ryan took a step toward me, and I realized he had said something.

“What?” I asked.

“Do you want to meet up with me later?” he repeated.

His tone was casual, but his expression was not. I looked hard at him to be sure I had understood correctly.

“I can’t do that,” I said.

“Why not?” he asked.

He moved closer, his eyes never leaving mine. My baby kicked my ribs.

“Do you want to finish this another time?” I asked.

“Why not?” he asked. “Why can’t you go out with me? I won’t tell anyone.”

With his left hand, he reached out and caught the billowing hem of my top. His eyes were piercing and raw.

“I can’t,” I said, pulling away. “There are rules against that.”

“So?” he said.

A few weeks before my baby was due, Sylvia planned a shower for me at the Waynesville Country Club. All of our coworkers from the mental health facility came—the child therapist, the administrative assistant, the sexual assault counselor, the substance abuse therapist. By then, I knew I was having a boy, and Sylvia had ordered a white cake with a light blue border from Whitman’s. Blue balloons swayed from the light fixtures and the backs of chairs while I opened frilly packages filled with nightgowns and Pampers and stuffed animals and teething rings.

A few days later, I came into work, and Sylvia was stirring a splash of vodka into her coffee. It was 8 a.m.

“I need to tell you something,” I said.

“Sure,” she said.

“I just...I was...”

“What?” she asked.

“I’m not going to be coming back after the baby is born,” I said.

She stopped stirring.

“Why not?” she asked.

“I want to be home with him,” I said, glancing down at my belly.

“But we aren’t finished with the project yet!” she said. “And what will you *do* all day?”

And I began a long list of all the things I wanted to do: I wanted to rock my son to sleep at nap time. I wanted to take my children on long walks. I wanted to give them Tylenol drops when they were sick. I wanted to roll my own

pasta and grow my own basil. I wanted to learn to make Cuban bread. I wanted to watch my daughter splash in the plastic swimming pool on our back patio. I wanted to match my husband's socks.

When I paused for air, I realized that Sylvia's square jaw had dropped into a long oval. When she finally spoke, her words were slow and deliberate.

"You want to match your husband's socks?" she asked.

It sounded strange, even to me. I stared over Sylvia's head to the pink magnolia tree outside the window. One by one, the blossoms were unfolding and scattering onto the ground below. A delicate, pink blanket covered the grass.

My husband, David, and I had dated for a while when I was in high school, but things didn't work out, and a few years later I married a man I had known for only three months, a man who was affectionate and passionate one minute, relentlessly brutal the next. That marriage lasted less than a year, and then my baby and I were back home, living with my parents. David and I hadn't spoken in two years when I called him one night.

"David?" I asked when he answered.

"Hey, Jennifer," he said.

Later that night, at his apartment, David sat in an armchair, and I sat on the sofa across from him, my infant daughter stretched across my lap. We talked as if no time had passed, as if this happened every day, a divorced woman with a baby coming back to visit a guy she dated in high school. Later, David walked me outside. It was January, and the wind cut through the trees. Snow drifted past the streetlights. Snuggling my daughter against his black leather jacket, David rocked from foot to foot while I searched through my purse for my keys. And when I took her from his arms, my daughter was warm, her tiny hands balled into fists against her cheeks, and she smelled like Johnson's Baby Shampoo and leather. Two years later, David and I were married.

"Yes," I said, looking directly at Sylvia now. "Yes. I want to match my husband's socks."

And then Sylvia finally uttered the word her mouth had been forming.

"Oh," she said, nodding rapidly as if to silence me. "Oh."