



Dear Uncle Mike,

My husband and I are in our mid-fifties and have been married for twenty-six years. I would characterize it as a good marriage. Like most couples, our sex life isn't what it was when we were first married, but compared to the complaints I hear and read about it's certainly better than average. No, I won't get into numbers. I had no idea there was any problem or that my husband was not satisfied with our physical relationship. I recently found

out he has been accessing porn sites on the internet. No, I didn't snoop. He has his computer set to display random images from his files of photos (family, friends, vacations) and I stopped to watch. Suddenly, there was a young woman performing sex with two men. I don't pretend to understand how, but the computer was selecting images from sites my husband had visited. Do people with children know about this? We talked. I had no idea he was interested in this sort of thing and I honestly don't know how to feel. Part of me is disgusted, not at the images themselves, but that my husband would spend time looking at them. Part of me is angry and feels betrayed. I am jealous of women who exist only on a screen and, to be perfectly honest, I am worried about being compared to them. Now, when we have sex, I can't help wondering who my husband is with. Please tell me this is a mid-life crisis and that he'll eventually snap out of it. What do you guys see in this stuff?

Unsettled

Dear Unsettled,

We guys see exactly what's there: naked women being, or pretending to be, lewd and lascivious. It's really not that complex. Someone for whom a statue should be erected defined the plot of every sex film as: women you'll never meet doing things they'd never do with you. It's fantasy, an accepted form of play. While it's unfashionable to acknowledge any difference between genders, male humans are more apt to be sexually stimulated by visual imagery than are female humans. And, although industry figures say that thirty percent of adult videos rented are rented by women (a figure Uncle Mike ascribes more to public relations than accounting), the industry exists to capitalize on men's restless urge to be titillated. Yes, Virginia, it's a guy thing.

Uncle Mike would hate to think that sexual fantasizing (or, in psychological terms, having naughty thoughts) is a bad thing, or that having them spurred on by watching professional actresses miming Passion and Ecstasy for a paycheck is a sure sign of demonic possession. Like anything pleasurable, shopping and eating truffles to name two, video voyeurism can become a habit. A bad habit is something that interferes with your relationships or your work. If nothing about your husband seems broken, he probably doesn't need fixing. So he likes to look at naked women. Unless he's a borderline sexual psychopath (something you would have guessed by now), the worst thing that can happen is he'll lose his imagination. Watching anything on a screen will do that to you.

As for your feelings, Uncle Mike would encourage you to continue to examine them. If the images themselves aren't disgusting (and, strictly speaking, they shouldn't be), then neither should it disgust you that your husband looks at them. Millions upon millions of men do. That's what makes it an industry. Jealousy? Of what, exactly? That your body doesn't look like theirs? Not only is this a profound waste of mental energy for a woman of your experience, but both you and your husband have known this for some time and, until your recent discovery, it didn't seem a large issue. Uncle Mike would advise against making it one. After twenty-six years, the two of you should be friends, right? Act like one and cut him some slack. Remember, he's just another victim of male brain chemistry.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Four questions, not in order of importance. Are you married? Are you under fifty? Are you heterosexual? Are you interested in corresponding with a 31 year old woman who finds you interesting?

Anne, Portland

Dear Anne,

Four answers, not in any order. You betcha. Not anymore. As far as he can tell, no. That's none of your business but if you must know, sure.

Dear Uncle Mike,

My boyfriend and I have been living together for about a year. I thought everything was fine. Then two months ago an old girlfriend of mine moved back to town. We've been seeing a lot of her. Maybe too much. She's really good looking and has always been a flirt. Lately I don't like the way the two of them are together. When she comes over for dinner, the goodbye hugs are lasting a little too long. Brad says I'm imagining things. She laughs and says I'm being silly. I'm not sure what to do. What would you do?

Worried, Astoria, Oregon

Dear Worried,

The first thing Uncle Mike would do is stop worrying. Things are what they are and aren't what they're not. What you're looking for is the truth. Invite the little hussy over for dinner and observe how much your dog of a boyfriend wags his tail. When the meal's over and the coffee's poured, put on your coat. Tell them you're off to spend the night in a hotel so they'll have a chance to discuss issues of hormones and loyalty and won't be disturbed by the sight of you putting your fingers down your throat.

Dear Uncle Mike,

My girlfriend is going with this great guy. I'd be happy for her except for two things. She doesn't really like him that much and I do. The guy treats her like a queen and she takes it for granted like he's okay until something better comes along. She can get away with this because she's gorgeous. She's done it with guys before and hurt them really badly. She knows I like him but he doesn't. I've told her I think she's being a spoiled brat. I'm friends with a friend of his, should I tell him what's going on so he can have some warning? Is there anything I can do?

Michelle

Dear Michelle,

There's always something you can do. In this case, it's nothing. If your friend feels its okay to play men like cheap guitars, that's her business. If the cheap guitar in question isn't smart enough to see what's going on, that's his karma. Some men, bless their empty little heads, will sacrifice large chunks of their dignity and peace of mind for the sake of beauty. Uncle Mike suggests you wait until your girlfriend is through with him and then see if the man knows how to appreciate a woman who doesn't regard him as a toy in her emotional sand box. Don't be surprised if the answer is no. We all have our lessons to learn.

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FROM THE LOWER LEFT CORNER

Intimations Of Mortality by Victoria Stoppiello

My coffee cup has a crack in it, and on this particular morning, it is a symbol of everything that is mortal. This cup could be ordinary, but it is one of a kind; it's a particularly spectacular, handmade porcelain vessel. It's a large cup, probably intended for a man's hand. The glaze allows strips of the original white porcelain to show through. Its beauty lays in its stark black and white, its squat yet graceful shape, but in particular, in its extremely glossy sheen.

This cup holds memories. It was formed and fired near the site of the Burning Man, in the cold, dry plains of northwestern Nevada, in the Valley of Many Smokes, referring to the hot springs and fumeroles that dot the landscape. The Burning Man is a festival of sorts, one I may never see—I found out about it too late. Now it has overreached and become a big event, with too many people, too many pyrotechnics, too much drinking, and too many young men just wanting to blow off explosives.

My coffee cup was born when the Burning Man was still little known, an anarchistic gathering of artists and desert rats. Once a year they built sculptures with found materials, including a gigantic effigy, during a week of camping, motorcycle riding and land-sailing on the flat desert floor. After this week or so of preparation and invention, the huge man was set aflame, a spectacular sight undoubtedly visible for many miles in the clear desert air.

The Burning Man gathering sounds similar to a Balinese funeral, where the deceased person's family hosts a celebration for a week, when all community members stop their routines to eat, be together, but most importantly, to construct the funeral vessel, a large and beautifully decorated bull. This materially glorious animal holds the coffin, and the whole shebang is burned in a spectacular funeral pyre—all accomplished with the uplifting spirit of an old-time New Orleans Dixieland funeral procession: "At last, at last, free at last" from this vale of tears, this worldly suffering.

My cup was born in the nest of such a festival. Passing through, we stopped at the artists' studio and saw many wonderful things. Most were beyond our budget, but I like to support artists, especially those who work in such remote spots. I wanted to buy some small expression of their art, therefore this cup.

The crack now isn't even visible. It hardly can be felt, but like my fine wrinkles, it's a clue to what lies ahead. Sooner or later, it will widen, a large chip will break off and the glorious cup won't hold liquid again. Perhaps my cup will continue as a flower pot; perhaps it will shatter into innumerable pieces, but my cup is also immortal. It will live perhaps forever, or at least as long as paper protected by glass can survive. That's because on our living room wall is a charcoal portrait of me.

In some ways this portrait is an iconograph of Finnish tradition: There's a book in my lap, a symbol of my love of reading and my educational achievements. I've been told that even poor Finns who work with their hands value books and knowledge. There is also a handmade knife, treasured by my dad. In the drawing, the knife seems to say "I am a woman, but don't mess with me", but also refers to an old prejudice about Finns: "They're all drunks and they all carry knives," according to a Swedish anecdote. My dad told me it was true; in the old days, the Finns *did* all carry knives and settled disputes with knife fights which ended with the first drop of blood. Since coffee drinking is symbolic of the gregarious, chatty side of me, and is also at the center of Finnish social life, the magnificent coffee cup is also part of the picture.

When the cup has returned to the dust from which it was made, I'll still have its image and my memories locked in the portrait. And when I myself am long gone, perhaps this mysterious drawing will pique someone's memories and curiosity—"Who was she, what is this all about?"—just as I look at the photographs of my recently deceased aunt, taken during her beautiful youth, a person I knew well, and yet could never know completely. This crack in my coffee cup reminds me that, as my cousin said, "Your life is just a lightning bolt—a flash and then gone." A blink in the cosmic eye.

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