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# A Bottle of Wine and a Box of Cake

*by John Wegner*

When Jill woke up sharing the bed with a McDonald's bag, a cake box, and an empty bottle of wine, she knew something was wrong. Worse yet, when she rolled away from the wine bottle, she felt the scratchy, over-washed hotel sheets rub against her naked body. She hadn't slept without clothes since she was 12, and even then she woke up at midnight and got dressed. As a general rule, she decided early on that clothes made for a safer night's sleep. Lying there, Jill could almost imagine the illicit thrill of a chance encounter: the bottle of wine, the naked body, but she didn't feel any post-coital relaxation and she couldn't imagine exactly how the cake box or McDonald's bag figured into a wild night of sex—she wasn't exactly a *9 ½ Weeks* kind of girl. From her pillow, she could see her skirt and blouse scattered across the room as if cast away in the heat of passion. Unfortunately, Jill thought, the only thing I cheated on was my diet. She shoved the wine bottle and the cake box away and hoped closing her eyes would stop the pounding in her head.

Jill started fading back into a dream about her high school boyfriend when her cell started vibrating. The world was spinning a half beat off from her stomach when she opened her eyes: like listening to Nine Inch Nails do Beethoven. Stumbling into the bathroom, she knew she could survive the head ache, but she wanted desperately to die soon so her stomach would stop squirming all over. The phone was still bouncing around as she rinsed her mouth.

"Hello?" Jill hated the way she sounded answering the phone. The little questioning tone at the end, unsure, a little scared. Like the next victim in a slasher movie right before she opens the door giving the killer easy access, she thought. She listened, eyes closed, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Walter. I'm okay. Stop calling. You're making my head hurt." She pushed end.

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It was supposed to be a quick trip to the store. Jill walked in at 3:47 and was in the checkout line at 4:01. Walter had called twice already, worried she would forget the organic vegetables and the red wine. "Pesticides get in the water table and cause birth defects." Jill mouthed the words silently as Walter spoke.

"Yes, I got the lettuce. Red leaf, organic. The wine is in the car—one of those Australian Reds and a California White of some sort. No, they aren't the cheap stuff. Corks and everything. Look, I'm almost to the checkout line, I'll talk to you later."

As far as Jill could tell, the only real difference between organic and non-organic lettuce was that one still had bugs and dirt on it. Walter's mother was convinced, though, that her sister's baby, a son who would have been about Walter's age, was born brain damaged because of tainted water in northern California.

Her phone rang again. Some people pace when they get nervous; Walter let his fingers do the walking.

"No, I haven't forgotten the cake. I'm going to Halfman's right now. . Have you cleaned the

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guest bath?" She shook her head no before Walter answered. "Okay. I'll be home in a few minutes." Walter probably didn't remember there was a guest bath, Jill thought. She saw the woman in front of her offer a sympathetic smile—women united by incompetent husbands—there should be a union. Or a firing squad. Jill smiled back.

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Jill started fading off to sleep, but her mind's eye was stuck at the dinner table last Christmas. She was surprised to learn over the carved turkey that she and Walter were trying to have a child, a task virtually impossible considering the knots she had the doctor tie after she miscarried six years ago. She offered to pay more for extra knots, determined never to face the possibility of childbirth again. The doctor, a middle-aged woman with long flowing hair, nodded knowingly when Jill asked her not to tell Walter. "Of course. Men don't always understand these things," the doctor had said but she looked at Jill as if she meant "Your husband is a doofus who should leave the gene pool." The look was fleeting and the doctor's face became impassive again. But Jill knew what she had seen. Walter and the doctor had only met once, but Walter had a habit of making a bad impression. Never mean, occasionally sweet, mostly Walter had become a dunce.

After Walter's announcement, Jill struggled with her conscience. Walter looked at her like her little cousins used to when they wanted her to lie for them. In the end, she decided Christmas supper probably wasn't the time to tell Walter's parents that they weren't having children, that Walter repulsed her, and that they hadn't had sex in a while and Jill planned to keep it that way. Some nights she felt like Penelope weaving and unweaving the giant rug to avoid the suitors. Even Walter wouldn't believe she had a headache every night. Working late, upset stomachs, projects due the next day. When those options failed, she wasn't above getting Walter drunk and helping him pass out on the couch.

They had fought later that night when Walter rolled over and tried to make his earlier claim come true.

"Not tonight Walter," she pushed him away. "How could you tell your mother we were trying to have children? I told you I'm not ready after . . . what happened." Jill occasionally played the trauma card. It was cruel and Jill felt vaguely dirty afterward, but, then again, it beat sex with Walter.

"Jill. It's been, what, 4 or 5 years? I don't want to sound insensitive, but baby, I've got needs." Walter scooted his hand up and down Jill's side like he was petting a dog. He reached around, grabbed her breast and squeezed. She felt like saying "honk, honk." Very sexy, thought Jill. It's like he's checking a piece of fruit. "My mom says a healthy sex life is important to a couple's well being. Come on. Being back home makes me feel sexy. Let me drive my train into your tunnel, baby." Walter always said this in a deep voice that was supposed to be seductive and, according to him, sexy. It always made Jill think of feeding a child his supper.

"It's been six years, Walter. And stop it." Jill gritted her teeth so she could shout in a whisper only Walter could hear. She slapped at Walter's hand. "First of all it's gross having sex with your parents right next door." She turned her face toward his. "And second of all, . . . Oh, forget it." She finished as her voice returned to a normal whisper and rolled over.

"What did I do wrong, Jill? Come on." He spooned himself close and started rubbing her thigh, making little thrusting motions with his pelvis, whispering "choo, choo" in her ear. "You'll feel better after we're finished. Maybe you can make a baby like mom."

Jill slapped his hand away again. "Walter," she said a voice that no longer cared who heard, "My tunnel is closed for repairs. Put your train back in your pants and leave me alone." She didn't tell him about her tubes. Walter was on a need to know basis. Jill crawled out of bed,

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pretending that she needed to use the restroom.

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Jill heard the phone vibrate and sat up. Her stomach followed a split second later and rose quickly into her throat. Jill lay back hoping to calm the beast threatening to explode.

“Hello. . . Walter, I’m okay. I’m at a Ramada Inn near Weatherford.” Jill held the phone away from her ear. “Don’t shout, Walter. Did your parents make it in?” Jill could see Walter’s father sitting in the lounge chair reading the newspaper. His mother would be standing behind Walter, hand on his shoulder, probably massaging his neck. Her stomach bumped slightly. “I just needed a break. I’ll call you later.” She punched the end key. Walter wouldn’t call back for a while, she knew. He was building an excuse, developing an alibi to explain her absence.

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When they first started dating in college, Jill felt lucky to find Walter. Her own parents had died when she was fourteen, and Jill had lived with an aunt and uncle. An only child at the time, Jill was totally unprepared to be the oldest “sister” in a house with five other siblings. At first it wasn’t so bad, but Jill soon learned that a favorite aunt didn’t translate into a great sister. Her uncle was a nice man, but he told her more than once that he was learning “how to parent along the way. I hope I’ve learned something by the time number 5, uh, 6 is your age.” Jill knew that having a teenager was bad enough; having a teenager thrust upon you opened up true horrors.

They did their best to treat Jill like one of their own, but Jill knew that the little things they couldn’t afford were because of her. Shoes worn just a little longer, fewer name brands, shorter vacations—Jill could see the relief when she left for college with scholarships and a willingness to work and pay her own bills. Her aunt sent notes and pictures, the occasional box of cookies, but after a year or so Jill realized she was on her own.

Walter’s parents, on the other hand, doted on him. His apartment was filled with photographs of him with his parents or his parents in far away places. Most of the pictures showed both his parents, but in his guest room, Walter had various pictures of his mother posing in her swimsuit, and, in a few, she was clearly sunbathing topless, the camera just missing what Walter called “the important parts.” When Jill asked if that was really his mother, she could see him blush ever so slightly. “She could have been a model for *Sports Illustrated*. Or *Playboy*,” Walter added. “You have hair just like hers,” he said as he moved forward and kissed her, “among other things.” Jill had to admit that his mother was a beautiful woman. Thin, youthful, with a great figure. After they had sex, he told her that was the room his mother stayed in when she visited.

Walter’s parents still sent him care packages and spending money, even though he was a senior in college. His mother visited him regularly. A senior executive for Brown and Root since the early 1960s, Walter’s father had retired early, paid for his son’s education, and took his wife on the occasional cruise. He had also taken up golf and various other hobbies that kept him too busy to visit often, Walter told her. They had a condo in Florida back when such things seemed straight out of lifestyles of the rich and famous. Jill could picture his parents holding hands, walking on white sandy beaches in exotic locations. She couldn’t remember the last time she saw her aunt and uncle hold hands and her parents were fading from memory.

Even in college, Walter had been kind of goofy. But that had been his charm. He needed her—at first to help pass Business Communications and later to “complete his life.” Back then, his flair for the romantic was, well, romantic. Jill felt needed and special. He was clumsy in bed, as if he expected her to do something else, but she just thought he would adjust to her needs. In the beginning, Walter bought her things and shared his parent’s gifts. The longer they were

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married, he just seemed maudlin, like a bad black and white movie. And his gifts started to feel like bribes—earrings, dresses, lingerie—all of it with too many strings attached.

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She and Walter had been dating about a month when his parents left for the Caribbean. Walter took her to his parent's house and the first weekend they had sex in all the bedrooms, including his parents'. At the time, she felt like such a rebel, so in love, a little kinky even. Later, after they were married, Walter insisted they live near his parents so they "could house-sit when they take off," Walter had said.

Even then, his parents sent gift packages. Shortly after they had moved to Humble, Jill found a box sitting on the front porch with her name on it. Walter was still asleep when Jill opened the box to find a bottle of folic acid, a pamphlet explaining how folic acid helps women get pregnant, and a small booklet of "Sexual Positions to Increase His Pleasure: A Guide for Newlyweds." At the bottom of the box was a note from Walter's mother that said "Welcome to the neighborhood!!!!" Jill flipped through the booklet and noticed some of the positions were circled. Walter's mother had written things like "looks interesting" or "Walter might like this one." Jill threw the booklet away before Walter got up. She struggled with a thank you card.

These "little gifts," her mother-in-law called them, showed up periodically. Occasionally, they included homemade applesauce or a bottle of wine ("nature's little love potion" the note had said), but more often than not the gifts were more disturbing to Jill—a porn video ("to help set the mood"), lingerie ("to keep things exciting"), and once, a tube of KY Jelly ("so you don't get too sore to keep trying"). Two years after they moved to Humble, Jill lobbied her company for a transfer to Abilene, anywhere really, far enough from her in-laws and their gift boxes.

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Jill let the hot water flow over her hair. She could see the icing melt and begin to run down her arm like mud in the rain. So far, Jill's only regret, other than her stomach, was wasting poor Mrs. Halfmann's icing.

"Big party tonight, Mrs. Childress?"

"Just my in-laws, Mrs. Halfmann." Jill looked up from her checkbook. "Sometimes it hardly seems worth the effort, don't you think?"

"Especially for the in-laws." Mrs. Halfmann looked toward the back. "Mr. Halfmann's mother was a trial, god rest her soul." She made the sign of the cross and kissed her thumb. "Some days, it was all I could do to be civil to that woman." She leaned across the counter and whispered. "When she died, I cried, but they weren't tears for her. I knew I had lost a husband and gained a son. More work and the day didn't get any longer." She leaned back, shaking her head and took Jill's check. "I can't tell you how many times I went to the grocers and almost didn't come back. If not for the kids . . ." Mrs. Halfmann gave a little wave. "Water under the bridge, right? Have a nice time, dear! I'll pray it's a short visit."

Turning onto the freeway wasn't as difficult she thought it might be. Traffic was light and whatever moral dilemma she might have anticipated went away as she rolled down the windows and turned the radio up.

Jill had turned onto the highway at 5:07 singing with Bruce Springsteen. The station was doing an 80s retrospective and Jill told herself she was just going to drive around and clear her head before heading home to Walter and his parents. The phone was ringing on a pretty regular basis now. Ten rings and then it would stop so Walter could re-dial. She smiled, thinking about the slow panic creeping into Walter's face as his parents came closer. She pulled over on the

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shoulder. Jill hated to drive while she talked.

"Hello?" Jill watched the cars drive by. "Oh. I'm just running a little late. I've got the cake. . ." She lifted the pink lid on the box. "It looks delicious." She swiped her finger across the icing. "Tastes good too. . . Sure. I'll hurry. Should be home soon." She put the phone down, opened the glove box and found a little plastic spoon. She looked at the bottle of wine and wondered if carrot cake went better with red or white wine. She took a bite before a semi drove by, rattling the car and her nerves. She got back on the highway, fully intending to turn around and go home.

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The cold water must have woken her up. Jill didn't think hotels ran out of hot water, but she also couldn't remember how long she had been standing in the shower. Drying off, Jill remembered the first time she met Walter's mother. They had been dating a short time when he took her home to meet his parents. His father was out playing golf and the house was silent. Walter smiled at her, leading her upstairs. Halfway up they heard the shower and Walter looked back and shrugged, clearly disappointed that someone was home. Jill stopped, expecting to go back downstairs and wait, but Walter kept walking. "Come on," he whispered. "We have time before she finishes." But Jill was having none of it. First impressions mattered to her and she headed back down.

"I'll just tell her we are here, okay." Jill wandered around downstairs. When Walter came down, Jill tried not to notice that the ends of his hair were wet.

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At about 5:30, Jill turned her ringer off and put the phone on vibrate. Walter had called again, wondering just when Jill "thought she might show up."

"Soon, Walter." Jill looked around and noticed a sign for Eastland.

"That's what you said 20 minutes ago," Walter almost shouted. Jill had to admit that Walter wasn't that bad. He never hit her, never yelled, and he didn't call her stupid names like honey or dear when he was upset. One time he did call her "mother" when she was pregnant and he was rubbing her neck, letting his hands slide down her arms so his fingers "accidentally" brushed against her breasts. It was about as smooth as Walter could be. When they first started dating, she found that kind of clumsiness endearing. That morning she threw up, and told him not to call her that ever again.

"Walter, I got to talking to Mrs. Halfmann . . ." Walter interrupted her.

"Jill, I don't care. My mother will be here in a few minutes and the bathroom still isn't clean. The food is in your car. And you aren't here." She could hear Walter breathing. Jill saw a County Line Liquor store just beyond the next exit.

"I just remembered that our corkscrew doesn't work very well." Jill started slowing down to exit. "I'm pulling into a liquor store to get a new one." Jill pulled into the parking lot. "I'll be home when I get there, Walter. You know," Jill added as she turned the car off, "you could have cleaned the bathroom yourself."

Corkscrew in hand, Jill sat in her car. Her phone vibrated against the cake box and Jill reached over and dropped it in her purse. She grabbed her spoon and took another big bite, wishing she had some milk. Her eyes rested on the two wine bottles. She looked into the liquor store, but no one was watching. The sign by the door warned her that consuming alcoholic beverages right here was illegal, but Jill had a vague memory of her father coming out of a

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store with two cups of ice and a bottle of whiskey. It was an odd memory considering she had so few of her parents, but she smiled. In her vision of him, he was happy and he gave Jill a piece of ice before he opened the bottle and poured whiskey into two cups. She heard her mother laugh and Jill reached over for the white wine. She saw her parents toast each other and Jill poured some wine in a cup that got left in the car. As she drank, she saw the clerk look at her. He waved and Jill held her cup up in a silent toast before backing out.

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Jill shivered as she walked across the hotel room to her clothes. She could see the second bottle in the trash can and she threw her hose on top of it. At least the maid will have something to talk about, she thought. She picked up the cell phone and dialed her number.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Childress? Is Walter still there."

"Jill? Boy am I glad you called. Walter has been worried sick." There was a pause. "Um. Listen Jill, Walter is upstairs right now. I think Martha went up with him to help calm him down. Should I have him call you back?"

Jill just sat there looking at the curtains.

"Jill? Jill, are you there?"

"Mr. Childress. Just tell Walter I never wanted to be his mother."

Without waiting for an answer, Jill pushed the end button and dropped the phone on top of the hose as she walked out the door.

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