

Mind Over Maury

How I learned to stop complaining, and love ESPN.

Flash fiction for guests of The WordFeeder.

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"Hey, Sue." It was Saturday morning, around 11. Maury was just coming back from Lowe's with a half a dozen or so plastic bags filled with what he needed for the weekend's projects around the house.

Sue had been friends with his wife, Doris, since college, a bridesmaid at their wedding 22 years ago. This morning, she had walked the few blocks from her house in their suburb to visit. The weather was perfect this morning early in the fall, cool, but not so much that they couldn't have their coffee around the small table on the porch that wrapped around the front of Maury's house. He was a little overweight, but still the same pleasantly good looking guy Doris has married, quick to smile, slow to get angry, devoted and attentive to his wife and children, especially lately.

"Hi, Maury," Sue smiled back at him, sitting sideways, one leg tucked under the other on the cushion one of their wicker chairs, warming her hands around the fresh cup Doris had been pouring for her as he walked up the path from their driveway.

"Hi, honey," Doris put the coffee pot back on the table, and was slouching back into her chair, crossing her feet on their way back to the ottoman in front of her. "What you got there?"

"Everything I need to clear up the last few items on your list," he responded without the slightest trace of sarcasm. "Am I the perfect husband or what?" The truth is, he was, at least recently, including in the bed department to Doris' pleasant surprise, and in every other respect.

"...or what," she responded warmly, kidding him with her smile. "You need help?" Doris started to get up, watching Maury struggle to hold the screen door open with his left foot while opening the front door with his right hand, the bags he was holding now dangling from his risk.

"No, no. I'm fine." And so she stayed where he was, waiting until she heard their door chunk shut before resuming her conversation with Sue.

"Wow," Sue couldn't help but notice, "what's happened to him? I didn't think Maury did stuff around the house, or anywhere for that matter..."

"...particularly," Doris finished Sue's sentence for her, "since he got that widescreen and added all those ESPN hi-def channels to our cable service."

"So what did you do," Sue asked her, pretending to suggest with her twice raised eye brows that it might have been something sexual, "to get his ass off the couch in your family room? ...Something maybe I can do for Bob?"

Laughing as she sipped on her favorite, oversized coffee cup, Doris couldn't wait to share her secret. "No, nothing like that, sad to say. It was, uh... Well, actually, I was going to the bathroom a few weeks ago, hiding out from the kids, fuming at Maury for ignoring them and me to watch some college game he couldn't care less about." Doris stopped for a moment, sat up and leaned forward toward Sue to talk to her more quietly, face to face. "So I'm sitting there fumbling through the stack of magazines in the basket, and I come across one of Maury's Popular Sciences from a few months ago. I figure, what the hell, I'm tired of reading catalogs anyway..."

"I know, there's nothing in any of them worth buying anyway, and the models are beginning to look like children. Just pisses me off."

"My point exactly, so I pick it up and start thumbing through the pages. It's sort of interesting, but I was just killing time until I get to back where they have all these little classified ads, everything from Viagra to kits for making personal helicopters, stuff like that, and then this one little ad catches my eye." She paused for dramatic effect, playing with her friend, taking a moment's break for a gulp of coffee.

"Com'on, already," Sue demanded, having fun being excited, "What was it?"

"It was this little ad for something called 'Mindset,' you know like a TV set gadget for your head. 'Changing the way people think.' was all it said, and a website. ...I don't know. It stuck in my mind for the rest of the afternoon so, what the hell, I went there."

"So what's it do?"

"It's what they call a 'smart card,' like a credit card, but it's programmable, that goes into a slot on the back of your cable box. Take a look. I didn't even know there was one."

"One what?"

"A slot, for the card, in the back of your cable box."

"And what's any of this have to do with Maury?"

"Listen, it's simple." Doris paused as if to give Sue time to write down what she was about to say. "...You put the smart card in your laptop, and run the software which lets you program one or more messages, just a few words, that the card will play every once and a while, every so many frames. It happens so fast, the person watching doesn't know – and you can program it to run on only certain channels..."

"Like ESPN!" they sat back and said simultaneously, nodding their heads slightly up and down.

"It's what they call," Sue recognized the process from some book on marketing and psychology she'd read once, "subliminal advertising, isn't it?" Doris smiled back at her in agreement. "... 'subliminal' because it affects the subconscious without the person watching knowing it. They tried an experiment once in movie theaters to see if they could get people to eat more Coke or pop corn. Apparently it worked so well, they made it illegal. ...Isn't it illegal?"

“Well, yes and no,” Doris was hedging. “The manual that came with it said it was illegal to use on other people without their knowing it, but...”

“Honey...” It was Maury, surprising them at the front door to ask a quick question. “Where did you put the shade you bought for our bathroom window?”

“It’s around the corner, in the bag leaning up against the coat stand.”

“Great. Sorry to interrupt.” And he was gone, the front door chunking behind him again.

“...According to the manual, it’s meant for personal use, you know, for people who want to stop smoking or suppress their appetite for snacking while they watch TV. ...But I figured, why not give it shot.”

“And you programmed it to tell Maury what?”

“A couple of things. That I was amazing, and that he should do whatever I asked him to do, and love doing it.” She stopped to chug the last few drops in her cup. “...It took a week or so, but then it started to work, and just keeps getting better.”

“Unbelievable,” and then Sue laughed, almost squealing with excitement, “and I want one!!”

“Com’on. Let’s get out of here,” Doris checked her watch and stood up. I’ll get my pocketbook and keys. They’re right inside on the hook.” Pushing open the front door, she reached to her right to get what she needed, “Maury!” she shouted to him. “Sue and I are going to get some lunch and catch the 2 o’clock show. See you later.”

“Have a good time,” he shouted back to her. “I’ll be done with all this before you get back.” And she turned, pulling the heavy wooden door behind her, leaving it for the screen door to take care of itself.

An hour or so later, Maury’s buddy Jake wrapped on the sliding glass door to their walkout basement. Peering over his shoulder from couch in front of the widescreen TV, he waved to his friend to come inside – huge, almost life size football players running across the wall of plasma behind him. “Grab a beer, this is getting good,” which Jake did, plopping himself down in the overstuffed chair where he always sat, reaching over the arm of the couch to grab a handful of popcorn, dropping on a few kernels on the way to his mouth.

“Where’s Doris?” Jake asked without looking at his friend, his eyes fixed on the action in front of him.

“Out for the afternoon with Sue.”

“Does she know?”

“No. Never should have asked me to clean up the basement. Wouldn’t have found it if I hadn’t been vacuuming behind the cable box.”

“Can’t blame her.” Jake understood from his own wife’s constant complaining.

“Nah.”

“So you’ve reprogrammed it?”

Smiling, Maury took a rare moment to turn away from the screen. “Let just say I wouldn’t watch Oprah down here if I were you, ...and the sex has never been better.”

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