

Aphrodite *in* Jeans

ADVENTURE TALES ABOUT MEN, MIDLIFE AND MOTHERHOOD



Katherine Shirek Doughtie

Haven Books 

Selections from

Aphrodite
in
Jeans

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MEN, MIDLIFE AND MOTHERHOOD

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For information, please contact:

Haven Books
10153 ½ Riverside Drive, Suite 629
North Hollywood, CA 91602
www.havenbooks.net

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“I woke up one day in my early forties and realized that my wallet of temporal currency was slowly dwindling. It was imperative I start spending the rest of it as mindfully as possible.”



From ...

The Day I Understood Little Red Sports Cars

T*his is my dirty little secret.* This is not for my husband or in-laws to read. This is not for anyone to read. This is my confessional.

It has to do with illicit fantasies and surges of unaccustomed energy. It has to do with outstripping one's own perceived limitations.

It has to do with being 41, a mother of two, a professional with a regular office job. I pay the household bills, I wash the clothes, I make sure the dog gets her medication refilled. And I go through my life with hunched shoulders and low-grade headaches. My mouth is turning solidly into a disapproving smirk, like my mother's used to do when she felt beleaguered and tense, which was almost always.

It was in this bedraggled state that I was strong-armed into working on the end-of-the-year play at my boys' elementary school. I had accidentally mentioned to the art teacher that I sometimes design lighting for theatre. Once she knew that, she would hear none of my excuses.

Keith, the other parent commandeered by the play committee, was tan, strong, skillful – and single. He worked with manic inspiration, rocketing on and off the stage, climbing the ladders effortlessly. His energy was contagious. We rigged trusses, we strung cable, we wired dimmers, we created magic. The smell of stage dust on the cables and lights took me back, made me think thoughts I hadn't had since college. Young thoughts. Wild thoughts. Crazy fun thoughts.

I felt blood circulating through my fingers and muscles. My steps were bouncy and I looked upon the world with a benevolent gaze. I found myself acting with patient sweetness to my children. I even managed to refrain (briefly) from nagging my husband. I could feel my hair growing. Food tasted better than it had in years, but I had lost my appetite.

Now, it is true. There were probably other forces at work besides stage dust. By night my dreams were populated with images of glistening forearms, writhing muscular bodies, dark thrusting impulses. The physicality of the work plus the creative collaboration with Keith put me over the edge. I was taken hostage by my hormones. I looked differently at every man walking on the planet. I was a sexual being and commanded my power with skill.

It was an insanely glorious week.

Everything changed. I was too amped to drive so I walked everywhere, my manic crazed energy propelling me mindlessly through the streets of Pasadena. I grinned and laughed more than I had in years. Inside this sedentary body was a 23 year old, and that person was glorying in her triumph.

But there was danger involved. The crazed hormones kept me awake, working on scenarios that would tap me in like this forever. Now they had gained ascendance, they were reluctant to let me go back.

There was no future for them in paying bills and doing laundry. Oh no. They wanted me to make the leap, join the circus, shake things up for good. Find a muscle man, they urged. You're a hot babe, they sang to me at night. You're not getting any younger, they whispered hot against my neck. Now's the time. Now or never. Do it do it do it do it...

From ...

The Aphrodite Phase

I think women who fall under the spell of Aphrodite during mid-life are far luckier than the ones who drink the divine juice earlier on. It's great payback for the years of high school agony, the wild 20's and the earnest 30's. The 40's seem to be the time to cut loose. The body is working better than ever (or can, if nurtured a bit), the brain is still sharp (except for that business of the perpetually misplaced keys), and the kids, hopefully, are old enough that they are no longer a source of total and constant fatigue.



Since the divorce, I've found I have a weakness for the men who really love women. Perhaps only complete womanizers are interested enough to look past the boring clothing and the two kids to respond to the cheap-bait sass that comes out of my mouth. Womanizers love me, and I love them back. We twinkle at each other. We fall into each other's arms like long-lost soul mates. Womanizers totally get me.

Because, I admit, I am kind of a man-izer. I collect men and cherish men and love them all. I am friends with almost every one of my ex-lovers.

So maybe the 40s is when women become man-izers – if they choose to be. Because now we know how to play the game. And we know who always holds the cards: We do.

It's true no matter what kind of woman you are – an Aphrodite acolyte or the biggest bitch queen in town. It's true if you're frigid. It's true if you could take it or leave it. And it's true if you're an honest-to-god horn dog and just want to fornicate like an animal

every day of the week. Even then, men need us more than we need them.

Which doesn't mean that a womanizer will stop womanizing.

And it doesn't mean that you won't get your heart broken a million times, just like you did in high school and college.

It just means that we know how to play the game. We are always the dealers. And so we can afford to have a little fun with it.

So, to all the women out there who know what I'm talking about, I'd like us to raise our collective champagne glasses and toast each other heartily. Ride the wave gloriously and strut your stuff. Walk around with a look in your eye that says, "Hey, pal, I know what you like. And I could give it to you if I chose. I have lived and I have loved and you will never find anything better than the particular cocktail of freedom and experience that I can whip up any day, any time."

And then take him. Or don't. If you're married, take him with a look that will leave him bothered for days. No matter what you decide to do, your job is to make Aphrodite proud.

She demands it. You deserve it.

From ...

The Napalm Incident

I hated that little fucking tuft right over the top of the crack. No matter what I did, no matter how hard I stretched the skin or scraped the razor, no matter how I positioned my legs or what shaving cream, gel, soap or temperature of water I tried – I just could not get that tuft completely gone.

I went berserk over that tuft. I say it in the past tense like somehow I've evolved. But this is not the case. I am still berserk over that tuft, even though (at the moment) it's pretty well been uprooted into oblivion. For now. It's like there is a remnant of wild boar DNA hidden inside of me that is tenaciously determined to show itself right *there*.

The tuft is dug in like a Jungian animus, like archetypical Shadow, like something that only shows its face in a dark and secret place. It's not just hair, it's Deep Hair. It winds its roots around the base of my spinal cord and threatens to take out my entire skeleton if I dare remove it.



It was a Friday night and the kids were with Tom. I had time to muck around in the world of feminine self-care, and I was going to emerge in a short time with a Clean Smooth twat and I could stop the madness once and for all.

I went upstairs, lined up my products, and stripped down. And, being a good documentation expert, I read all the directions. I wasn't going to be like all those other girly-girls in the world, just slapping it on any old way. Nope, I was going to approach this in an intellectual, methodical, sensible fashion.

Well, mostly. I didn't have time to do the patch test they advocated. That's for those silly women who have sensitive skin. . . . I knew I was cool enough not to have sensitive skin. And when I finally did slather the stuff on, I realized that my Wild Boar hair was going to need a few extra minutes of depilation, just to really get into the roots. So I left it on, well, perhaps a tad too long.

Sure, it stung. It was supposed to sting. Meant it was working. And yeah, my skin turned a fiery red almost immediately: another good sign. But the problem first started to manifest when I tested a little corner to see if the hair was just going to slide right out . . . and saw most of my skin coming off on my finger. Not the hair, mind you: just the skin.

It took me a few extra minutes to realize that the stuff was still digging its way into my body while I was gently trying to rinse it off. I tried a washcloth but it pulled off more skin. So I started, with increasing haste, to get it off, splashing water all over the floor.

Did it hurt? Ah. Yeah.

About fifteen minutes later, there I stood, with a pubis that looked for all the world like the back of those baboons in the zoo. Bright red, shiny with peeled skin, and yes, quite a bit of hair still happily manifesting itself throughout the region.

I sizzled. I oozed. I stared at myself in the mirror and thought, man, I've done it this time. . . .

From . . .

Context Sensitivity

T*he paramedics burst into the restaurant*, their bright bulky uniforms creating instant chaos. I trail behind, wanting it all to go away. We are such a *scene*. I perceive sudden hushes in the conversation as people look up, starting up again with morbidly curious whispers when we pass.

I assume that he'll still be unconscious (or worse) when we get back to the table. Instead, when we arrive, my Dad is sitting up, his face still a stomach-wrenching blue, eating saltimboca with a kind of fierce determination. He is 87, he's out with his family, and dammit he's going to enjoy himself.

He looks up at the paramedics, and then at me. He's pissed as hell at all the intrusion. The paramedics say he should really go to the Emergency Room for further examination, but we all know that would entail a serious fight.

Appetites (except for Dad's) have been seriously diminished. We watch him eat for a few minutes, then give up and tell him we're going. We decide to nix going to the ER. As we leave, my five year old son, Chris, runs to hug the waitress whom he's decided he wants to marry. She has tears in her eyes.

Driving home after dropping my dad off at his apartment, Chris is very quiet. This is the weirdest situation I think he's ever been in. I am shaken to the core, painfully aware of the exquisitely tenuous connections between all of us. He falls asleep in the car; as I carry him in, I feel his sleepy, trusting weight and my heart breaks with the aching of it all.

I lay Chris down in his bed and pause to give two-year-old Jack a good-night kiss. In sleep, Jack is beatific, an angel. Awake, he is Dr. Freud's poster child.

It's all about control for Jack. Every day for the past few months there has been some kind of issue. Sometimes it's diaper changing. Sometimes it's getting into the car seat. Sometimes it's food. Sometimes it's whether or not he's allowed to open the door himself.

Everything is an issue to this two-year-old. Everything is a symbol of the basic problem: he is smart enough to know what he wants to do, and yet his physical prowess is not able to keep up with his desires. Frustrated, violated by his own inept body, he howls at the universe, rages at the people trying to help him.

Just like my dad.

They are at opposite ends of the spectrum, and their lives are mirroring each other perfectly these days. Jack is on the ascendancy of the learning curve. He is gaining skills, figuring out tricks, implementing his knowledge more and more every day. As his mind quickens and assimilates, he tries to make his body keep up. The lags are frustrating, but his future will hold ever-greater competency and rewards.

My dad, sadly, is on the downhill side. His mind is failing at a slower rate than his body. He knows that both are no longer reliable, and his tirades at that injustice are full of fury and howling disbelief. He is losing his words as rapidly as Jack is gaining his. He is losing his balance as Jack learns to jump and coordinate.

Like Jack, he knows what he wants. Like Jack, he frequently fails at getting it. Like Jack, he feels that life is pitted against him. Like Jack, he is right.

From ...

Prague

I *loved his words.* His words didn't just move; they were break dancers on the hot sidewalks of New York. They didn't just sing; they were street musicians in the tunnels of the Paris Metro. His words were gymnasts executing breathtaking routines; they spiked their dismounts with a precision that gave me the chills.

He loved my words back. Through some incredible chance, we found we each held a separate dictionary, the words of one craving the words of the other. It was far beyond a sexual urgency. When our words got together they did the tango.

Our words were instantly intoxicated on each other. The second day we exchanged about thirty emails. We were up to a hundred a day within the first week.

Long before we even spoke, our words were making love to each other in long sensuous strokes, reveling in languid afternoons. They would take occasional breaks and then crawl back in for more. If language was heroin, our words would've been found six weeks later in some Hell's Kitchen backroom, intertwined, with the needles still stuck in their arms.

From ...

Citizens of Different Countries

E*van is 20 years younger than I am.* And every time I talk to him I'm struck, again, by how completely not insane our relationship was.

There are all sorts of assumptions made about relationships with such a huge age difference. Like obviously we'd enjoy different kinds of music. Or that he'd be so unschooled in the refinements of the world that I couldn't take him anywhere. Or that he'd be scorned for being seen in public with someone who looks like his mother.

Every one of these assumptions proved to be untrue. We could not stop talking – we talked on the road, at work, in the parking lot. I was never bored; he was never confused. We saw La Boheme together at the Met, and were both moved to tears. Nobody laughed at the way we looked together because we looked *good*.

The age difference manifested itself in ways I could never have predicted. It was not that we were strangers. It was more that we were from different cultures. And the biggest difference was that I had been to his country, but he had never been to mine.

Little things brought out the difference. He had a \$6000 sound system in his Honda. In *his* country he still had a concept called “expendable income.” He lived in the house he grew up in, with his mother. That was like finding out my lover regularly ate monkey brains for afternoon tea. And he thought that life could be planned. That was one of the few things I laughed openly about. Life could be planned: only someone from his country could entertain a notion that sweetly far-fetched.

From ...

The Berm

We settle in on the beach, picking a place right where the sand slopes down to meet the water. The boys run off and start throwing rocks. We dump the bags and set up the umbrella. We push the sand down to make a berm, a protection from any stray wave that may encroach. “The best thing at the beach is making a place for yourself,” he says. We make a place for ourselves.

The boys dig their feet in the sand, wiggling their toes while the water rushes over their ankles and legs. They hold their arms out, keeping their balance. They are new best friends and have been inseparable for about two weeks. The logic of the universe revolves around their double planet. They yell to each other across the sand, their feet buried. My son is slightly less tanned, younger. His son is bronzed and taut.

The boys build tunnels through the berm. The tunnels serve to keep the mound intact, a sort of release valve for the water to go instead of eating away at the downhill slope. They soon tire of the tunnels and want to go on a hike up some rocks. “Hold the fort,” he says, taking off after them.

I sit, my feet against the berm. I am here spontaneously. I have brought no books, no paper, not even a hat. I wear a borrowed hat. I watch the surfers hover out by a rock jutting up from the water. The waves roll the smooth stones down on the beach. I sit. A frantic person suddenly stilled.

The tunnels the boys built fill over and over. Their top arches collapse. The water begins to encroach on the walls of the berm. It is becoming obvious that some maintenance is in order.

I get up and start pushing sand against the walls to fortify them. The water licks away the sand. I place one of the round rocks against the downhill wall. The rock holds the sand in place nicely.

I have a plan now. I start putting rocks all along the front wall of the berm. There are now three distinct areas – the tunnels have expanded to be wide throughways between the two outer walls. I practice stacking the rocks in a way that will keep the defenses strong. I think of my stepfather, a stonemason. I love the feeling of building something strong, even though it collapses at a rate slightly slower than I can erect it. I range further away, picking out just the right kinds of rocks. The water still encroaches.

Just to be on the safe side, I build Berm #2, upslope about three feet. Since Berm #1 is under steady siege, I want to be sure to protect our blankets and bags. I redouble my efforts on Berm #1. The wall is looking good. The reds and grays of the rocks blend together, forming a whole. I start building around the edges, to protect the steadily dwindling mound of sand. The berm is now almost entirely made of rock. I find a strand of bulbous yellow kelp and festoon one wall with it. I stand back for a moment, thinking how good it looks, thinking I may take a picture of it just to remember. Then a wave comes and wipes it out in a fraction of a second.

I run up the sand and grab our things, moving them to higher ground. The second wave comes in and demolishes Berm #2. In three minutes there is nothing left except scattered rocks and a limp line of kelp.



I am here with a man who is not my husband. We orbit around each other, vibrating with the same frequencies. We have a strange intimacy, taking care of each other's children. He washes my son's hair. I hold his son's hand. He leaves offerings from his garden on my front porch – sweet corpulent tomatoes, fragrant

sage, hot chilies. Within a very short time we have gotten into a groove, speaking a shorthand, knowing the same plan. I am utterly and completely relaxed.

I call my husband who is at a party with some friends. "I'm never coming back," I say. Everyone laughs. I tell them I'm staying over to camp out with the kids.

That night we shuck fresh corn and he makes pasta. I have nothing to do except watch and try to get the boys to eat their dinners. They are playing with flashlights and toys and want to go down to a gathering a few campsites away. There is a rumor of s'mores, an intoxicating lure for a five and six year old.

We eat our adult dinner while they play. We drink Merlot out of blue plastic cups. He tells me a story. He was traveling in Italy, and telling a group of various sorts of Europeans about how his life was going to work out. He was going to move to L.A., work in the movies, everything was going to be fine. One of the Italians looked at him. How do you know this will work out this way? the Italian said. It is such an American trait to be so sure of the outcome of a plan.



In my thoughts of him, he acquires significant proportions. He is a life force dispensing sensual flavors, tapping out exotic rhythms, evoking long-forgotten emotions. Creator of succulent life. Lord of a fertile realm populated by skittering lizards, sensual seething yellow squashes, tangled marching vines. He is humanity and laughter and worry and concern. Washer of hair. Singer of songs.

We dance a dance of intimacy and reserve. The synchronicity of our thoughts is a given. I play with it, testing it. I think about infidelity, as though it hasn't happened yet. Technically, it has not. We don't touch. We don't say the words. I have no idea how he feels about me. We either know or we don't know.

I am caught in the whirlpool of emotions. I feel life and joy and anguish wailing out around me, tumbling behind my footsteps, cascading around me like a swirling force field. Like incoming waves crashing on a shore.

The accuracy of the situation does not in any way destroy its truth.



The edges change. The surfers ride on the incoming waves, finding harmony with the forces bigger than themselves. Land-dwellers build walls and fortifications, resisting the surges and pull of the tides and waves.

How do we know the outcome of a plan? How can we fortify ourselves against every contingency? The nature of the world is to break down, to change. The hard lines crumble. The careful edifices fall. Children grow up. Loyalties shift in an instant.

Surfers find their balance by acknowledging the power of the inevitable, and riding it with grace. In the same way, the act of building the berm was a joyful one. The berm stood at the boundary between two worlds. It was a false protection between the fragile shifting line between land and sea. There was pleasure in the construction of the fortification, no matter how doomed.

But when it was destroyed by the forces of nature, there was only one possible response. Move the blankets. Enjoy the changing tides.

From ...

Purple Flowers

W*here is my husband in all this?* He's fine with it, he says. He says he doesn't care if I cheat as long as I'm happy, because then he has a happier wife and his life is more pleasant. He says this more than once and I believe him. My soul deeply needs to believe him. And it's not until many years later that I realize that his cavalier attitude is deeply hurtful in ways I'm still getting over. Maybe it masked his own disillusion – or his own philandering. I never knew and never want to know.

I didn't cheat. But that didn't stop the cataracts from being stripped from my eyes. It was as though I'd become completely alienated from the third dimension and now I was seeing the world for the first time. One day, as Keith and the kids and I hike, I spot a patch of purple wildflowers, tucked into a mountain crevice, and think I have never really seen purple flowers like that ever before.

I hadn't noticed when the world started to go monochromatic. But one day I saw the purple flowers. Like in the movie *Pleasantville*, I started to see color.

From ...

Breaking New Ground

In my new apartment I've carved out a small space for a garden. I have a backyard that is smaller than a tent and out of it I dig out some grass along the wall, giving myself a two foot ribbon that gets just enough sun to grow things.

Tending that garden is the single loveliest part of my day. I sip my coffee or tea while standing outside my kitchen window, sprinkling the plants that grow fat and huge and unruly in front of my eyes. When they become crowded and threaten to overwhelm each other, I cut large bunches of Chamomile and Feverfew and hang them on my walls to dry, so I can make tea in the winter.

Every morning, ritualistically, I nibble on sprigs of chocolate mint. I crush the leaves of the Cleveland Sage in my hands and think no perfume in the world could smell as richly sweet. The first water on the hot soil in the summer mornings is heady with ozone and life. I can breathe out there. I can start the long process of healing.

Drinking the tea from the medicinal herbs is not nearly as effective as the growing of the plants themselves. Standing there watering, with the morning sun on my back, I slowly and almost imperceptibly feel my neck and shoulders relax. My tight forehead begins to unwind. My fortresses slowly, slowly, start to send their guards out for coffee breaks, and then lunch hours . . . and finally home to go rest for a while.

From ...

Dances With Co-Workers

After about a week of non-stop togetherness, I feel a shift in his demeanor. At brunch, I ask him what's going on. Well, there's a problem, it seems. His mind has kicked in and is saying that since I am too old to have a child, we obviously can't get married and therefore shouldn't be involved. He is fine when we are together, but when we are apart his brain is working overtime. And it's not looking so good.

We continue this conversation through brunch and then take a long walk. As we walk we hear the cries of the wild parrots that fly around South Pasadena. They are noisy birds and fly in groups, settling in trees raucously screaming at each other.

We stop under a magnolia tree, looking for the parrots amongst the big waxy green leaves. We crane our necks and point the green birds out to each other, as tickled by their presence as explorers coming upon an undiscovered river.

Walking away, I say, listen to me. We don't know how this will all play out. How can you take something that is happening now and junk it because of what may or may not happen later? The here and now should be respected. *This* is what it's all about. Finding wild parrots with another person.

He says, yeah, but you can do that with a friend. You don't need a lover to do that with.

I say No. With a lover the leaves become more than leaves. They become nesting places for wild things. With a lover, the common is transformed and the exotic is revealed.

A lover has a sense of discovery attached. You walk away holding hands. You go back home and make love all afternoon. And with a lover you fall into that gauzy afterglow, and hear the cries of things still undiscovered echoing in your dreams....

From ...

You Had Me at 'No'

I *fancy myself a connoisseur of unavailable men.* There's a lot to be said for them. Unavailable men allow me to project all sorts of cool patterns upon them without fear of actually getting into the reality thing. Unavailable men are great receptacles for high passion and drama, without demanding too much vulnerability of my own in the process. I can try out all sorts of things with them because I know I'll never have to truly mean it.

Unavailability takes all sorts of shapes. Marriage or other serious commitment is kind of an impediment to availability (sometimes even when he's married to you). Geography can pose a problem – or enhance and prolong excitement, depending on how fast you can type, how good you are at phone sex and how many minutes you have on your cell phone plan.

Emotional unavailability is really my specialty. It's insidious and sneaky and I can get sucked in deep before I realize I've hit a wall. Hitting that wall of emotional distance is like finding out that the other person actually lives in Antarctica. And, as it turns out, he is not at all interested in moving.

But I love him, so I figure I can join him in his frozen wasteland. I go to great lengths to find the perfect emotional mukluks that will enable me to join him in his territory – only to find out (once I've moved) that he actually lives in Brazil. I then chase him around the emotional globe, never finding myself in the same place that he is ever again.

From ...

Owners of the Dream

I go to my old house tonight for my ex-husband's 40th birthday. It's warm and filled with his new friends, my old friends, the still-empty walls where my furniture used to be. Women I've never met shake my hand and look at me with a weird kind of curiosity.

I look at them and think, huh, you've been with the father of my kids. You've been with him in this house that I poured so much heart and soul and care into for so many years. This warm little home with its Christmas tree and my abandoned wreath on the front door. You slept in my bed.

The jealousy bypasses the man and goes directly to the dream. Someone now is the owner of that dream. Someone now snuggles in that bed and feels that sense of secure peace that I had believed to be mine.

I would've loved to stay in that dream forever, but I was the one who woke up first. I was the one who forced the questions out into the open. I was the one whose disillusion raged inside the house until the windows shook. And I regret none of it. The awakening had to take place. It was as inevitable as the dawn.

I look around and wonder if one of these women will wake up in my old bed someday and wonder what happens next. What choices will *she* make? Is it the nature of all dreams to fade into reality and become made new, over and over again? If so, I embrace the next awakening. And I look forward to the next dream that I will be graced with, someday.

Selections from

Aphrodite *in* Jeans

CONFESSIONS BY A WRITER WHO IS PART MOM, PART
PHILOSOPHER, PART LOVER, AND ALL WOMAN

C*ome on a journey* with the soul of an adventurer and explore the landscape of the heart. With a wicked insight and unflinching courage, Katherine Shirek Doughtie turns a clear lens on the venturing spirit, ruthlessly examining her own experiences as she dares to tackle life head on.

“I woke up one day in my early forties and realized that my wallet of temporal currency was slowly dwindling. It was imperative I start spending the rest of it as mindfully as possible.”



An accomplished writer, **Katherine Shirek Doughtie** has been writing for screen, radio and print for many years. In this collection of essays, Ms. Doughtie shares her unique voice as she speaks to the issues of women and the men in their lives.

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