

Love in the Time of Trump

Laura Kipnis



A few months before the election, when eleven six-foot-five effigies of a naked Donald Trump, then the 2016 Republican presidential nominee—bulging paunch, saggy ass, mottled limbs, constipated visage, and puny dick—popped up around the country, I briefly liked being an American. We were tragic absurdists, a nation of disgusted pranksters. The statue had no balls. Like most women, I've never been entirely clear on what balls are for, or why they're meant to symbolize traits like courage and daring. Aren't they actually the most vulnerable spot on a man—is that how men conquered the world, by costuming their vulnerabilities as mettle? (Something I wish I were better capable of, for the record.)

The country's disgusted fascination with Trump's body united us, or so I briefly thought. We were riveted: by the shameless comb-over, the Orangina skin, the stubby fingers, the clown-car neckties. It was a sick pleasure—you couldn't take your eyes off him, no matter how much you despised him. Trump made it seem right-minded to despise him for his aged, saggy ass, and by extension all male bodies, aged and saggy or not, because that's where their privilege resides—in their anus mouths and the gross stuff that came out of them, and where their sweaty hands traveled, and making every last thing about their all-important dicks. At some level, you sort of knew that bodily aesthetics shouldn't bear the burden of moral judgments or political animus, but as far as Trump, we were going to hand him his saggy ass and send him on his way.

That didn't exactly happen, as the history books will forever record. What won't be preserved—and what you might not ordinarily think would even be the case—is how seemingly extramarital events, like an election, seep into your actual marriage like runoff from a backed-up sewer and stop you from wanting to touch your husband's body (except when extremely drunk). Or how the imperiled condition of liberal democracy could mean that if it were ever possible to sustain a deep human connection between a man and a woman (a balancing act between intimacy and disgust in the best of times), it was now largely a thing of the past.

After the election, I located and ordered a smaller replica of the naked Trump effigy online, fabricated by the same anarchist collective that made the big ones, and which now resides on a shelf above my desk, looming over me, throttling my imagination. Sometimes I can practically feel its hot, foul breath on my neck. The keyboard is like a hostile psychoanalyst, I avoid it at all costs. Everything I write feels like an infected wound, for instance the book I'm supposed to be finishing (now a year late). Everything I write feels like it's secretly about my marriage. For all of this, I blame my husband. I'm a blamer, obviously, but it's not as though he's blameless.

To wit: the dinner party, the Sunday before Election Day, where J., the supposed “leftist,” announced that Trump being elected, reprehensible as he was, would be better for the country than Hillary being elected if you cared about radical social change and not just preserving the status quo. The chaos of a Trump presidency and the political realignments it would force would at least open up the chances for a more radical left, not to mention the end of the Republican Party. It was time to stop voting for “the lesser evil.” Anyone voting for another establishment centrist like Hillary was just voting for inertia.

There ensued a lot of yelling about the Supreme Court and Trump's racism and J. being a ruling-class stooge. Hitler was a “change agent” too, spluttered one of the other guests, making violent air quotes. “Can't pull the lever for a woman,” sneered a drunken woman friend of the couple whose apartment we were in, an old-school feminist filmmaker who'd had a brief spurt of acclaim decades ago with the movie about hooker-assassins. People looked at me like, What the fuck? I shrugged like, What are you going to do? “Save your liberal outrage,” J. was saying, never happier than when setting people off with his contrarianism, which at the beginning I liked about him (not boring), although it had recently occurred to me that him moving through the world playing the Big Id forced the rest of us (i.e., me) into the role of superegos and scolding parents, since how many ids can there be in one room? At the moment, it was irritating me. For one thing, I never wanted to be anyone's parent, I'm a committed maternity-dodger. Also the fact that he'd managed to upend a glass while gesticulating and the woman next to him was blotting

the resulting puddle with her napkin—J. has a way of getting other people to clean up his messes. It crossed my mind that my husband covertly related to, or even envied, Trump’s bulldozer of an id more than he cared about reinventing the left, about which, sure—that’s going to happen.

In the cab going home, I said, trying to keep it light. “What the fuck was that about voting for Trump? Are you insane?” He answered with a twitch of his eyebrows (which needed trimming, I noted). If I didn’t remind him to trim them they’d sprout across his forehead like pubic hair (will women ever stop trying to rein in men?). I was feeling more aggrieved than I reasonably should have—at the moment Clinton seemed to have a solid-enough lead—but being unreasonably aggrieved is pretty much marriage-degree zero, as I’ve learned over the last five years (it was my first marriage, his second). Trump’s pussy-grabbing tape had been released the month before; just locker-room talk he’d pooh-poohed like he was a linebacker for the Giants. Something was bristling in the political firmament as far as the male-female thing went. Even I was feeling it, despite having no vast investment in electoral politics (I’m a registered political fatalist). “There are no atheists in foxholes” kept going through my head, though I wasn’t sure it applied.

“You’re not really voting for him,” I either asked or declared as the cab bounced up Sixth. “We live in a blue state,” he said faux-equably, “what does it matter?” To which I replied, “It matters to me. I would consider it a betrayal.” “Voting is something we do in private,” he said. “Behind a curtain. It’s not subject to spousal review.”

“Don’t think we’re ever having sex again if you vote for Trump,” I mock-threatened.

Was he serious? Was I? We didn’t have sex that night—I’d drunk too much and was a little queasy. Then came the election. At one level things went on, unthinkable as that was. At another level everything turned to shit, then died—my optimism, for instance. The world smelled foul. Some ineffable thread or continuity that I hadn’t realized was actually holding everything together had given way.

One version of marriage is that it provides a refuge from the world, or at least keeps it at bay, but the world has become way too encroaching.

Laura Kipnis is the author of Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus and Against Love: A Polemic.