

Laura Kipnis

## Oh, Mr Hitchens!

In 2010, when a book I'd written called *How to Become a Scandal* was going to press, my editor contacted Christopher to ask for a blurb. He sent back three choices, the first of which read, 'Laura Kipnis promised me a blowjob if I endorsed her latest triumph, which I hereby warmly and devotedly do.' I'm sure it says nothing good about me that I found this funny, especially since using it would have so perfectly – and devilishly – enacted the premise of the book. Though generally no prig, sadly my editor insisted we go with the more conventional third option (the second was a double entendre about a now mostly forgotten Republican senator caught in a clumsy men's room encounter). She did forward me their subsequent correspondence: 'Christopher – you are a scream!' she'd written back, to which he responded, 'Yeah? Well a lot depends on which one she picks.'

I can be as humourless as the next leftwing feminist but for some reason Christopher's, what to call it – lasciviousness? antiquarianism? – amused more than offended me, though his public anti-abortion stance was noxious and, one suspects, hypocritical. Colour me surprised if that particular edict was upheld in practice. In any case, I never thought of him as someone you'd go to for instruction on feminism, and increasingly not on any political question, yet it was perplexingly hard to hold his bad politics against him. Mocking him on gender could even be fun, as at least there, unlike elsewhere, the positions seemed lightly held. When he published his notorious 'Why Women Aren't Funny' piece in *Vanity Fair*, I responded (I hope a teensy bit funnily) in *Slate*, where he also frequently wrote, that though it was a fascinating portrait of female nature and relations between the sexes, it was unclear to which decade it applied – it had the slightly musty air of 1960s-ish Kingsley Amis, wrapped in nostalgia 'for the merry days when sexual conquest required an arsenal of tactics deployed by bon-vivantish cads on girdled, girlish sexual holdouts. "Oh Mr. Hitchens!" you imagine one of the potential conquests squealing at an errant hand on nylon-clad knee.'

My problem with Christopher, hardly mine alone, was (to state the obvious) simply that he was one of the more charming men on the planet and mixed with liquor, this is a dangerous combination. Like most

people who knew him at all, a few of the drunkenest nights of my life were spent in his company. Conversations were funny, flirtatious, frank. Yet the rightward turn and increasing political rigidity also made him seem ridiculous: eruditely shrill.

Oh man, the rigidity. On one occasion, Christopher was speaking at Northwestern, outside Chicago, where I was teaching – I believe he was to talk on Kissinger, so it must have been before 9/11 and the endless chest-thumping about Islamofascism. The talk was arranged by one of his devoted local lieutenants, Danny Postal. I knew Danny slightly, in part because his uncle Bob Postal had been a charismatic Chicago area Adlerian psychotherapist whom my mother saw, and as a troubled teen I'd been shipped off to see him too, then forced to attend some sort of group therapy session for teens that he ran, where the group confronted you, viciously enumerating your flaws. Danny had barely known his uncle (who was estranged from his own family) but if you've cathected onto one Postal, you cathect onto them all.

Anyway, Danny and Christopher were meeting for drinks (of course) before Christopher's talk. Christopher told Danny to invite me to join them which I obediently did. The talk was to start at 7:00. We were maybe fifteen minutes from campus. At 6:45 Christopher was ordering more drinks while Danny was feebly insisting that it was time to leave and Christopher was promising he would, after just one more. Danny, who'd no doubt sold his soul to campus powers to scrape up whatever astronomical fee Christopher had required, decided the best course was for him to get to campus to announce an unforeseen delay, as it was to be a packed auditorium type situation. I was left to ferry a worrisomely relaxed Hitchens to deliver his talk. Danny left, Christopher ordered another round of drinks, and I decided it wasn't my problem.

The conversation veered, of course, to Bill Clinton, Christopher's then current hatred, and the Juanita Broaddrick rape charges against Bill Clinton (Broaddrick had given a number of different stories, including in sworn statements), a subject about which Christopher became, in a matter of seconds – when I mentioned Broaddrick's conflicting accounts – spitting mad. Like, livid. Clinton had raped Juanita Broaddrick and that was all you needed to know about Clinton – Christopher claimed to have hard evidence on this, but wouldn't reveal what it was. (He may have said he'd spoken to Broaddrick himself, I don't recall, just that he was mysterious about how he knew what he knew.) He was indignant that I would question any of it, and thus him.

Clinton wasn't anybody's boy scout, and maybe he'd done everything he was accused of, though it was also clear that the people trying to leverage the sexual accusations against him were worse people than

he was, and some of his accusers were happy to let themselves be pawns in the game of bringing down his presidency. I'd done some research myself on the *American Spectator's* 'Arkansas Project', funded by the horrid Richard Mellon Scaife, which led to the former-far-right lapdog David Brock digging up the Paula Jones story, and eventually to Clinton's impeachment. I always wondered what Christopher's response would have been to the chorus line of Clinton accusers (Paula Jones, Linda Tripp, Katherine Willey and Broaddrick herself) marshalled by the noted feminist Steve Bannon to show up at the 2016 Trump-Hillary Clinton debate as Donald Trump's guests. Because Trump was what – some friend to womankind?

Perhaps it's easier to conclude with certainty, post #MeToo, that Clinton wasn't just a sexually compulsive good ole boy but a stone-cold rapist, but back then even many stalwart feminists were willing to regard Clinton's roving as Hillary's problem, not ours, and certain of his accusers with scepticism. Christopher, on the other hand ... Something about Bill Clinton's sex life seemed to derange him. He was off the rails on the subject, literally sputtering. I tried to put it to him that he seemed, well, *overinvested*. It seemed way too personal, somehow *off*. What was it about Bill Clinton that had this unhinging effect on him? (I was kind of drunk at that point myself.) I suppose I expected him to at least pretend to ponder the question, devote maybe a few seconds to a show of self-examination. Anyone would. Not him. He was barricaded against anything I could say, also against the 'what is this "about" for you' sort of conversation that drunk people are known to have, which is one of the fun things about drinking, Something obdurate and hardened switched on instead. Thinking was not what was taking place, just pre-rehearsed lines and a lot of outrage.

I always wondered, in the usual armchair-psychoanalyst fashion, if at some level that was what deformed him politically: this rancidly psychosexual Clinton obsession. I knew there'd been a semblance of sexual overlap at Oxford – I happened to know it from the woman herself, who was and is, in fact, gay. She'd had (separate) one-off threesomes with both of them, though in an entirely unconsummated fashion (strip poker, a kiss ...). According to her, Christopher later told a reporter for the UK *Sunday Times* that he'd shared a girlfriend with Clinton in college – this would be her – which way overstated what had actually taken place.

When I later tried (and failed) to read *No One Left to Lie to*, his anti-Clinton screed, it reminded me of what had seemed so deranged and shrill that evening in Chicago. Of course, there'd be much more of that to come: the bellicose over-certainty about Iraq, the increasingly militaristic posturing – there was a comic rigidity about it. I'm thinking

of what philosopher Henri Bergson wrote in his 1900 book on laughter about what turns people into comedic figures:<sup>2</sup> being unaware of something automatic or mechanistic in your attitudes or actions, like Lucille Ball on the chocolate factory assembly line, turning into an automaton herself as the line keeps speeding up. Inflexibility is funny, though also a tragic waste of whatever's human in us. The human is elastic.

I saw Christopher, shortly before his diagnosis, at a party in New York. He'd already been told by doctors that he had to stop smoking and said he was going cold turkey the next day, but was madly puffing away that evening, like a prisoner's last meal. He mentioned, melancholically, other renunciations he was being forced to accede to – he wanted to talk about my (some thought) pro-adultery book, *Against Love*, which someone had told him to read. He'd sent some young person out for a pint of scotch and a bottle of cough syrup that were handed over to him in a brown paper bag while we were talking – on the terrace – so he could smoke down his last pack.

There was a sentence of Christopher's that I always remembered, from a review of something by Richard Yates. I wished I had written it. Regarding Yates: 'It's clear that he's no fan of this smug housing development or the new forms of capitalism on behalf of which its male inhabitants make their daily dash to the train.' It's a sentence I'm sure he gave little thought to, but I loved its man-of-the-world swoop – from a writer's oeuvre to the banalities of suburban marriage to the mode of production, crammed into an offhandedly elegant sentence. There were always things to admire in his sentences, even as his political instincts went to shit.

There was even occasional good advice. He wrote, in *Hitch 22*, that if you hesitate about writing that well-wishing note to someone, just do it. I'd heard, by the time I was reading it, that he was sick and after getting to the end of that line immediately wrote him a note. Being me, I couldn't resist adding that I'd been appalled to read in the memoir that Michael Chertoff, the former Homeland Security Director, had performed his citizenship swearing in. Christopher had been palling around with some pretty crummy people after 9/11: Chertoff had figured in my scandal book, the one Christopher had blurbed, wearing a different hat, having relentlessly and mercilessly prosecuted the former judge Sol Wachtler, who'd gone nuts and stalked a former lover. Chertoff really was a creep, I said. Christopher wrote back, conceding that he hadn't been aware of that at the time, which seemed, for him, surprisingly conciliatory. Maybe he'd figured that me berating him about Chertoff was a bit of covert flirtation, which no doubt it was. Old habits die hard.

## Notes

- 1 Laura Kipnis, *How to Become a Scandal* (New York: Metropolitan, 2010).
- 2 Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1911), 8–19.

## Author Biography

Laura Kipnis is a critic and essayist. Her most recent book is *Love in the Time of Contagion: A Diagnosis* (Pantheon).