

# What's Not Said

A Novel

Valerie Taylor



SHE WRITES PRESS

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This is dedicated to the ones I love:  
*My family—Lindsay, William, Jeanne, and Cecilia*

*The cruelest lies are often told in silence.*

— Robert Louis Stevenson



## To Om or Not to Om

Kassie prided herself on being a control freak—not the *my-way-or-the-highway* kind of bitch, rather the *do-the-right-things-right* stickler for details. After all, being a perfectionist flowed through her DNA.

Indeed, Kassie didn't alphabetize her spice rack as her mother did. But once upon a time as she prepared to leave for her freshman year in college, she counted the number of cotton balls she used in a week and then calculated a semester's worth. When she ran out two weeks before finals, she'd discovered her plan had one flaw—her roommate. Lesson learned. She hot-footed it to the nearest drug store and gifted her roomie a package to call her own.

Kassie would freely admit she also had a well-developed time management gene. The best part of her day was when she planned the next. When the Franklin Covey store closed in Boston, she took it personally, swearing she'd never shop at that damn mall again. Oh sure, she could order her supplies online, but the thrill of touching the freshly printed planners and sniffing the plush leather binders

was stolen from her. How would she ever survive? A quick visit to the Kate Spade store took care of that near disaster.

So imagine what was going on inside her highly compartmentalized mind when the day hadn't started quite the way she'd intended. She rationalized time was on her side. The hands on the oversized, round clock hanging prominently on the hospital's waiting room wall read four-seventeen. Was it early morning? Middle of the night? Didn't matter.

Either way, like her cotton ball miscalculation, this trip to the ER was a minor speed bump. Her plan had arms and legs. The day's agenda was as simple as one, two, three—get to the Red Sox game at Fenway, celebrate afterward, tell her husband she'd filed for divorce. Piece of cake. All she needed to do was get Mike out of the hospital and back home so she could jumpstart the rest of her life.

Leaving nothing to chance, four years ago with the help of her lawyer, Kassie drafted longhand on a single sheet of yellow, lined paper what she'd say to Mike and hid it in her black Kate Spade wallet along with a list of baby names on frayed blue and pink Post-it notes. She practiced a million times—role-played with her best friend Annie, recorded it on her iPhone, and recited it solo in front of her bathroom mirror. By now, she knew the simple words by heart. She was ready. Now it was up to him.

Granted, the calendar on the wall behind the nurses' station in the ER lobby said it was Good Friday. *Screw that*. Come hell or high water, it would be Cassandra O'Callaghan's Independence Day. It just had to be. She'd put it off long enough. Maybe there'd be no parades, no fireworks on the river, no Boston Pops at the Hatch Shell, but there'd be a declaration of freedom . . . her freedom.

For more years than she was willing to admit, Kassie tried to convince herself that telling her husband she wanted a divorce shouldn't be so distressing. After all, she was a mature woman, a successful marketing executive in her own right. Throughout her

career, she'd handled many thorny interactions—money-grubbing ad agencies, arrogant creative directors, egotistical copywriters. To her credit, she'd confronted every business challenge thrown at her and triumphed, most of the time anyway.

Kassie's professional, confident persona was merely that—a mask she'd perfected throughout three decades of climbing the corporate ladder with its discrimination and bosses who relished the bar, both drinking at it and moving it. This was contrary to her personal life where she avoided conflict, especially when it came to Michael Ricci. Ever since he was her Italian professor in college, she approached him with deference, expecting him to grade her every performance. And grade her he did, as a student, a lover, a wife.

"Sometimes I think you leave your brain at the office," was a Mike-ism Kassie heard way too often.

Would that be his reaction to her news? Would he take her seriously? Did couples who were married three decades, *a.k.a. forever*, get divorced or did they just suck it up and choose to live together separately?

Had he been unfaithful? Sometimes she'd wished he had been. At least that would mean Mike was passionate about something, if not her.

Would he be surprised? Or maybe he'd be relieved. It was no secret their relationship began deteriorating a few years after they married, after the miscarriage. Kassie spent much of the first half of their marriage trying to save it, and most of the second half trying to escape it.

Several years ago, well at least over the last four to be sure, she'd start each year with one goal: get the hell out. And then something unpredictable, either work or family related, derailed her, making her put off what she knew deep in her heart and soul she had to do.

"Coward," Annie had said over and over and over.

“No, just waiting for the opportunity. When it knocks, I’ll be ready. You’ll see,” Kassie would say, wagging her finger.

To stay motivated, she established annual mini bargains. If she filed for divorce, she’d buy a new car, or a diamond ring, or take a cruise around the world. Yet, even her mind games hadn’t worked.

Motivation wasn’t the issue. There were other barriers to exit. She and Mike weren’t getting any younger. Both were middle aged, though he had ten years on her. They’d spent more than half of their lives putting up with each other’s quirks. Change wasn’t in their vocabulary.

Yet Kassie believed Mike deserved to find someone he’d smile at when he woke up in the morning, as she had. And, frankly, she’d grown tired of being scolded by Annie and of delaying the inevitable.

So, when the new year began with Annie chastising her again, Kassie posted a “Just do it” note on her computer monitor at work. And she made a list of what it would take. At the top: courage and a long holiday weekend. Courage, because if she trusted anyone’s opinion of her, it was Annie’s. And a long weekend, like Easter, because she reasoned if she announced the divorce on a Friday, Mike would have the weekend to process and cool down before the next work-week began. And she’d have the weekend to celebrate—step two on her agenda. Ooh la la.

Earlier that week with D-Day approaching, an endless *you-can-do-this* message looped through her mind. Kassie felt as if her blood cells could break through her skin and explode like Mentos in a bottle of Coke. The person she was about to confront wasn’t some impersonal business associate. This was Mike, someone she once loved. Someone she’d expected would be the father of her children. She had to do something to keep her emotions in check the night before the big reveal or she might chicken out *again*.

Annie suggested a distraction might do the trick. “Take Mike



out to dinner or a movie. Keep busy. The night will fly by. You'll see," Annie said.

Though a good idea, Kassie was skeptical. There was one problem. Thursday night had always been "Must-See TV" in the Ricci-O'Callaghan household. It was the night when America's sitcoms and dramas soared—the likes of *Cheers*, *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, *Grey's Anatomy*. Mike never did much else on Thursday nights other than watch TV, no matter the current lineup.

"Shoot me. I'm a homebody," he'd grumble.

Mike had his rituals, as most people do. Kassie accommodated his more often than not. On her way home from the office on Thursday nights, she would buck traffic, struggle to find a parking space, and pick up a pizza for Mike from Boston's North End.

"If you can't get good pizza there, you can't get it anywhere," he'd say. Another Mike-ism.

It didn't matter Kassie had to go out of her way to get his favorite pie or that she rarely ate pizza. Early on in their relationship, Kassie slipped into the habit of putting Mike's needs first. She wasn't proud of subordinating hers. In her way of thinking, habits created within a marriage—whether good or bad—became normalized and accepted. Over time, rationalizing her subservience toward Mike became Kassie's survival mechanism, as did her having a life outside her home.

Take Mike's pizza routine. Though Kassie would remind him his doctor had cautioned him not to eat pizza, Mike would eat it anyway. He always had it with pepperoni and mushrooms, just as he always ate Cheerios for breakfast. He'd wash down his pizza—not the Cheerios—with a beer or two, plunk his dishes in the sink for Kassie to wash, and then head for his favorite Barcalounger in the family room for an evening of comedy and drama. If this kept Mike happy and allowed Kassie some pseudo-freedom, that was fine with her.

So imagine her surprise when Mike said, "Let's do it," when she

suggested they go out for dinner on a Thursday of all days. When he added, “Oh, date night. We haven’t done that in a while,” she had to admit his reaction was not what she expected. It’d been eons since they’d been there, done that. Nevertheless, she was delighted to check “plan Thursday night” off her list.

Other than feasting on lobster, dinner that evening at *Naked Fish* proved uneventful. Not much meaningful dialogue transpired between them anymore. Their conversations these days were often one-sided. Life with Mike was all about Mike, every day, all day—unlike the early years when Mike started his marketing consulting business, and Kassie’s own marketing career looked promising. They had so much in common then, it seemed. Within a few short years, they’d become a power couple in Boston’s advertising and marketing world.

Life was one big turn-on. Their dinner table repartee then was full of excitement, problem-solving, and luscious gossip about who was screwing who at the office, figuratively and literally. Sex often was their dessert served at the table, on the floor, against a door. Ah, those were the days.

Nowadays, Kassie would start, “How was your day?”

“Okay, how was yours?”

Then she might say something like, “We met with Sam today. You remember the asshole who—”

Only to have Mike interrupt with something like, “We just signed Eagle Bank today. They wanted to do TV ads, but we recommended they start with radio. Walk before flying . . .” He’d pause, expecting her to laugh.

She didn’t. She’d let him ramble, inserting her travel plans into the conversation whenever he shut up and took a mouthful. He’d never remember she told him when and where she was going, but she knew she had. Her conscience was clear, at least somewhat.

A similar scenario repeated itself that night at dinner, without the sex. She reminded him she would be flying to Washington, D.C., over

the weekend to pitch a new assignment to Georgetown University on Monday. When they returned home after dinner, Mike retired to his chair and the TV, and Kassie bolted to their bedroom, which they still shared . . . *imagine that* . . . presumably to pack.

Kassie had her rituals, too, most aimed at slowing the inescapable aging process. Despite the butterflies fluttering from her stomach to her chest, or because of them, she stuck to her nighttime routine, detailed on green Post-it notes with red tulips on her side of the double-wide bathroom mirror.

“You’re not in college anymore. Take those notes down before I do,” Mike said on more than one occasion. She loved them. Maybe because he hated them.

Although she knew the list by heart, she read it aloud. “Brush teeth, floss, remove make-up, moisturize all over, stretch, meditate.”

She tried to relax on her mauve meditation pillow and changed up her usual practice, chanting instead the short and sweet words she and her lawyer drafted. With deep cleansing breaths, she began.

“Om. Mike, there’s something we need to talk about.

“Om. We’ve been working on us for a very long time.” *Not true, I’ve been working, he’s been skating.*

“Om. I don’t mean to hurt you, Mike, but I’ve filed for divorce.

“Om. It’s not you, it’s me.” *Am I really going to say that?*

“Om. You’ll be served papers next Tuesday. Where do you want to receive them?

“Om. Better here than at the office, eh?”

She bowed her head and raised a prayer to sweet Jesus and her mother to give her the courage and strength to survive the next twenty-four hours.

With that, Kassie popped a Tylenol PM for good measure, climbed into the California king waterbed she wished they’d replaced years ago, and with steamy visions of where she’d be sleeping the next night, sunk into a toasty, soothing sleep. For a while, anyway.

In a drug-induced fog, Kassie opened one eye. The bedroom was dark, except for a smidgen of light outlining the bathroom door at the opposite end of the bedroom. That was odd. She rolled over and searched for Baby Ben. She knocked over a soy candle and the familiar aroma of green apples floated in the air. Thankfully it wasn't lit.

Fumbling around, she found the clock. Without her glasses, Kassie pulled the clock right up to her face. Ten after two give or take. She never could remember if the clock was ten or twenty minutes fast. Kassie started setting her clock ahead five years ago as a New Year's resolution. She always tried to tackle one more thing before leaving the house, so she figured finagling with the clock would break a bad habit. Not so much. Instead, her brain recalculated the time, and she'd end up either late or right on schedule. It wasn't the problem solver she'd hoped it would be, but it entertained her. It may have even replaced a few of the brain cells the wine she drank had killed.

A quick swing of her arm and sweep of her leg across the bed confirmed Mike was elsewhere. With a grunt, Kassie threw back the heirloom quilt that once belonged to her mother and lifted herself out of the waterbed. She flipped on the lamp she and Mike had made from seashells they'd collected on the beaches of Cape Cod, sat on the wooden bed frame, and tried to figure out what was happening. In her mind's ear, she could hear Mike scold her for sitting on the edge of the bed.

*What are you trying to do? Break the bed? Flood the whole house?*

But then she heard moaning and got a whiff of an unmistakable odor wafting from the bathroom. A line etched between her brow. No doubt about it. Mike was puking.

*The lobster?*

She ambled toward the bathroom, giving her arms a good wake-up shake. "Gee whiz, Mike, you must've pulled the short straw tonight. My lobster was de-licious!"

Kassie opened the bathroom door. She stood speechless.