

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

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ATTACHED

Laura's ad immediately grabbed Tom's attention.

Unhappily married seeks same-35.

He was at the kitchen table, surfing the web on his MacBook as he sipped orange juice and ate a defrosted bagel. It was 10:47 on a Wednesday morning. He had rolled out of bed less than fifteen minutes earlier.

"I'm sick of my husband but am not interested in leaving him, at least not yet. It's complicated. I don't have kids and don't want any. I'm looking for a discreet affair with someone around my age, attached or not, who can relate to my situation. Must live in Manhattan and be tall, white, fit, clean-cut, educated, drug-and-disease free, and have most of your hair. Include a clear, recent photo. E-mails without pictures will be deleted unread. And finally, those of you thinking about replying in order to berate me on moral grounds or call me a 'shallow bitch' or a 'dumb whore' or something to that effect, allow me to suggest that you channel your energy into a more productive activity, such as adopting a puppy or, better yet, fucking yourself."

Tom liked her attitude. She seemed fiery, passionate—and so different from his wife.

Replying to online personal ads was a new diversion for him. A few women had answered him, but it had never gone beyond exchanging e-mail addresses. Concerning his marital status, he was always honest, writing only to those who said they were open to meeting someone in his situation. More than a few women in New York were.

"Hey there. I can definitely relate to what you wrote. I'm married, too, not very happily, no kids. I'm 33, six feet tall, 190 pounds. I live in the East 50s. A recent picture of me should be attached. Tom."

His wife, Beth, had taken the photo a year and half earlier when they were in Belize. Tom was alone in it, wearing sunglasses and a t-shirt, a waterfall cascading behind him. He thought he looked good in it, his shoulders and arms seeming muscular. He had gained a few pounds since then, but not so many that the picture was deceptive.

As he sent the e-mail, he reminded himself that the recipient was more than likely to be overweight, homely, mentally ill, or some combination of the above. Most of his prior interactions had ended with his receipt of the woman's picture.

She wrote back in the afternoon.

The photo was of a curvaceous brunette. Wearing a bikini as she reclined in a lounge chair as she sipped a frozen drink. She wore sunglasses, her lips curled in a slight, mischievous smile.

"Thanks for the note, Tom. I'm Laura. Interested?"

He wrote back immediately. "Very much so."

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Their first meeting was at a record store in Times Square. Tom's college buddy, Zach, was friends with a fair number of creative types, among

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them the members of a hardcore band named “Flesh Flood” who had released a major label CD before breaking up and disappearing. The store still had a few copies of it the last time Tom had been in there.

Tom suggested to Laura that they meet at the band’s spot among the alphabetized racks.

He got there first, arriving right on time. Not seeing her, he flipped through the CDs, the tab for “Flesh Flood” nowhere to be found.

“Hey.”

Wrapped in a wool overcoat, Laura stood beside him, her skin pinkish from the drizzly, damp October weather. She looked even better in person than she had in her picture, her black hair cut much shorter.

“Hey,” he said.

She reached over, her fingers searching for the non-existent “Flesh Flood” tab.

“I guess they no longer carry it,” Tom said, his voice tinged with a sadness that surprised him.

Laura pursed her lips, holding in laughter. “What a fucking tragedy.” Her tone became severe, even a bit judgmental. “Ever cheat on your wife before, Tom?”

He shook his head. “No. Never. Ever cheat on your husband?”

“Absolutely not,” she whispered, then leaned close, her lips just inches from his ear. “And I was a virgin on my wedding night.”

He jerked back his head to get a look at her face.

“I was,” she said. “I swear. Don’t you believe me?”

She grabbed his hand, squeezing tightly. “Know somewhere we can get a drink?” she asked.

He took her to a bar on Ninth Avenue. It was big and dark, with chairs and couches arranged around low tables. Most of the patrons were there alone, their faces illuminated by the glow of their laptop screens. Wi-Fi access was free with the purchase of a drink.

They sat at a booth in the back. He had a pint of Brooklyn Lager. She opted for a vodka martini.

“You’re actually the height you claimed to be online—that’s unusual. Why don’t you begin by telling me about your childhood?”

Tom wondered at first if she were joking. Her stare indicated that she was indeed serious.

He explained that he and his wife Beth had grown up in the same town in New Jersey but that they had not been close when they were young. She had been one of the smart kids, while he had been more of a jock.

“What sports did you play?”

“Soccer, basketball, baseball,” Tom said. “But I wasn’t that great at any of them. It was a small school, pretty much all white.”

She nodded, hardly seeming uninterested. “And your professional experience?”

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He told her that he had worked a series of sales jobs since college, bouncing around from company to company, never really getting a foothold anywhere.

"So you're not presently employed?"

Her tone bugged him. "No. I'm looking for something new. Not looking very hard, obviously, but looking." His being out of work had been a major strain on his marriage. Beth badgered him about it constantly.

"And what sort of work does Beth do?"

Even if nothing else came of it, Tom had hoped that meeting Laura would distract him from Beth, not remind him of her. She was the last subject he cared to discuss. "She's a corporate lawyer. She works a lot of hours. She went to Columbia."

"Columbia law school or Columbia undergrad?"

"Law school. Yale undergrad."

Once again, Laura nodded, showing little emotion.

Tom sipped his beer. "All right. I've said enough. Your turn."

"There's not much you need to know about me. I got married when I was twenty-five. My husband, at the time, was thirty-six."

"Meaning he's now forty-six."

She smiled. "You have quite an aptitude, I see, for math."

Tom smiled back at her. What a conceited bitch, he thought.

"He's still forty-five. His birthday's next month."

Tom figured money was the probable motivation for a woman as good-looking as her to be with someone so much older. "I'm going to go out on a limb," Tom said, "and guess he works in financial services."

"That" she said, "would be a reasonable assumption."

"And does he know you cheat on him? Because you seem awfully relaxed about this."

"We tolerate each other. And we don't ask questions." She perked up, sipping her drink. "So tell me more about you and your wife. How are your relations?"

"Lately? Pretty much nonexistent." Her displeasure with his job search was not the only source of stress in her life. Her workaholic bosses were driving her crazy, placing an insane amount of pressure on her.

"And how would she feel if she found out you were having an affair?"

The thought made him physically ill. He imagined her eyes glistening with tears, her pale skin cracking like porcelain. "She would be devastated," he said. "She would leave me."

Laura glanced off to the side. "I'm really not sure you're cut out for this, Tom." Her words were not an expression of sympathy. They were a challenge, a provocation.

He met her gaze head-on. "As long as she doesn't find out, we'll be fine."

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Laura nodded calmly. "I'm thinking an hour or so to start, once a week, in the afternoon. Minimal strings. How does that sound?"

The prospect of an affair, so enticing in the abstract, had suddenly lost its appeal. He felt dirty, as if his entire body was greasy with perspiration. "Okay," he said.

"Do you have a place in mind?" she asked. "Because my apartment is out of the question."

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"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Zach said. "How did this come about?"

They sat beside each other at one of the last dive bars in the East Village, drinking draft beers that Tom had paid for. The sound system blasted "Lithium" by Nirvana, a song that Tom used to merely dislike but had since come to despise.

"We met on the internet," Tom said.

Zach colored his words with the sarcasm he was so fond of. "Of course. The internet. How did anyone ever find romance before there was an internet?" His hair extended nearly to his shoulders, the same length it had been when he was in college, and his glasses were the same style as well—the bohemian sort with small, round lenses.

"So here's the thing. She and I need a place to meet. Once a week, for about an hour. I was wondering if we could use your apartment. I'd pay you, of course."

"You're serious?" Zach asked.

"Yeah. I am."

"So what sort of hourly rate would my apartment command?"

Tom had planned on offering twenty dollars, but Zach seemed more ambivalent than Tom had anticipated. He knew Zach needed the money, as he barely scraped by on the wages he earned from temp jobs and bartending. He considered himself an actor, though he worked infrequently and had never really made any money at it. His most recent gig had been a year earlier when he had a tiny part in a bizarre, disturbing short film that one of his director friends had made. Tom had attended the premiere, clapping politely when it was over while the rest of the crowd roared with approval.

"Forty dollars," Tom said.

Zach sipped his beer, mulling over the proposal. Then he smiled and extended his hand. "Congratulations. You got yourself a love nest. Of course, I find it morally repugnant that you would betray your wife in this manner, but I guess that's between you and your conscience now, isn't it?"

Zach and Beth no longer spoke to each other after. Zach invited Beth and Tom to a party at an artist's loft in Brooklyn, where Beth had been appalled that several of the guests there were smoking cannabis out of the bong. She confronted Zach about it, demanding that he apologize for failing to warn her that there would be "illegal drugs" present. "Oh, give me a break," Zach had replied. "They're passing around a bong, not a dead baby." Tom could not help laughing, which prompted Beth to scold him afterward for failing to stand up for her.

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Still, Zach's subtle mocking of her, particularly his derogatory use of lovely, set Tom on edge. "Don't mention her again," he said. "I mean it."

Zach lifted his hands in mock surrender. "Whoa. Sorry. Didn't mean to offend your delicate sensibilities." He took a drink. "So when do you and your paramour expect to have your first rendezvous?"

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They arranged it by e-mail, settling on Wednesday at noon. Tom arrived at Zach's place half an hour early, letting himself in with the spare key Zach had given him.

The landlord, who was supposedly a drug addict with a variety of legal and personal problems, had allowed the building to fall into disrepair. It stood out from the street's other brownstones, all of which were appealing and well-maintained. The one next door was equipped with wrought-iron window boxes that were intended to hold potted flowers.

Zach's well-worn comforter was dark brown, its white seams frayed in several spots. Tom folded it, placing it neatly on the end of the futon. Leaving the two pillows in their cases, he placed them on top of the comforter. Then he stripped the sheets and added them to the pile.

Tom remade the bed with the white linens he had just purchased. They looked sterile and institutional, and he wondered if he should have instead chosen the blue or green ones he had been considering.

He sat on the futon. It was a sunny day, but Zach's apartment let in little light. The barred windows looked out on the alley behind the building.

My marriage is over, he thought.

He had never been susceptible to panic. While some of his teammates had vomited before big games, he had remained calm, going out there and playing with his usual consistency. In college, he had taken exams cold and always done fine.

The buzzer sounded, its noise absurdly, jarringly loud.

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Their next meeting was the following Wednesday, also at Zach's apartment.

They lay beside each other, naked under the sheet. Laura spoke in a sleepy monotone. "Tell me why you married Beth."

The question upset the pleasant blankness of his daydream. "What?"

She dug her thumbnail into his chest, the sharp pain rousing him. "You heard me."

Tom pushed away her hand. "Since when did we talk about our spouses?"

"Since right now."

He untangled his arm from beneath her. "I was in love with her. At least I thought I was."

Her cynical smile returned. "Oh? And how did you know she was the one?"

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While it was warm beneath the sheet, an uncomfortable chill nonetheless spread through him. "She was so smart. And together. And she had a solid career. And at the time, she was pretty good-looking." He paused a moment, then added, "She still is."

"Let me guess. She's gained weight."

"Not much," he said. "Some."

Laura stretched her arms and settled into a more comfortable position. "So you married a Type A lawyer whom you considered 'pretty good-looking.'" She shook her head. "What aren't you telling me?"

"Nothing," he said, his tone hardly convincing.

"How much money does her family have?"

Practically everyone from his hometown knew the answer to that question. Beth's parents lived in a big, restored Victorian house whose interior had been gutted and modernized.

"A lot," Tom said.

"I knew it." She climbed on top of him, pecking him on the lips and stroking his hair. "We have something in common, don't we?"

"I didn't marry Beth for her money."

With a wave of her arm, she indicated their surroundings. Fixed to ceiling with thumbtacks, drooping at its center, was a square of dyed fabric, a purplish blur speckled with tiny white diamonds. "Let's face it, Tom. You don't exactly suffer from a surfeit of ambition."

"Neither do you."

"And I will be the first to admit as much." She kissed his mouth, his lips barely reacting.

The clock on the dresser read 1:33. She sat up abruptly, stroking his stomach. "Time's up, darling."

He rolled onto his side, watching her slip on her black panties then thrust her arms through the loops of her matching bra. "You know a lot more about me than I know about you," he said.

In the corner was a chair with vinyl upholstery. Sunlight struck it, making the dust that clung to its surface sparkle. She sat on its edge and pulled on her socks. "Perhaps next week we'll have more time to talk."

She put on her jeans, then her shirt, her breasts large and shapely beneath it.

"What's the hurry? Where do you have to go?"

Pouting, she placed her hands on his head. "What's the matter? Are you going to miss me?"

"Yes. I am." He sounded vulnerable, childlike.

She stroked his face, then smiled. "Good."

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Laura was late for their next appointment.

Tom put his arms around her as soon as she came in the door. "I was worried about you," he said.

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Grimacing slightly, she pushed him away.

He could anticipate what was coming next—a vague pronouncement of how something no longer felt right to her.

“Please don’t take this as a criticism,” she said. “You’re perfectly adequate, and in no way have I been disappointed.”

“Okay. And?”

“I think we need to liven things up a bit. So I went shopping.” The bag she carried was light blue with paper handles.

From inside it, she pulled a black nylon blindfold. He took it from her, feeling a strange exhilaration as he rubbed his thumb across its smooth fabric. “You’re into this sort of thing?”

“I don’t do pain. Only restraint.” She averted her eyes, as if slightly embarrassed. “Do you have any prior experience?”

He shook his head. “No. None whatsoever.”

The cuffs for his wrists and ankles were made of velcro and were perfectly comfortable. He lay on his back, blindfolded and immobilized.

The following week they switched positions, and he was undecided as to which he preferred.

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Unable to sleep, Tom stared at the ceiling, fantasizing about his next encounter with Laura.

His wife rustled beside him. “Are you awake?” she whispered.

“Yeah.”

She moved closer, resting her head on his chest. “I’m proud of you,” she said. “The way you’ve turned things around lately.”

“Thanks.” As far as he could tell, Beth did not suspect that he was cheating on her. He had adopted a more positive attitude, and she seemed unsure at first what to make of it. Each morning when her alarm went off, he got up as well and headed downstairs to their building’s gym to run on the treadmill. He cleaned the apartment every day and had stepped up his job search, landing two interviews.

“You’ll find a job soon,” she told him. “I know you will.”

“Let’s hope so,” he said.

But the prospect of working again depressed him. It would almost certainly mean ending his affair with Laura.

She slid her hand down to his crotch, gently stroking him.

“Okay?” she whispered.

The request took him by surprise. It had been a while since she had expressed any interest in sex. “Yeah,” he said. “Sure.”

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His renewed relations with his wife did not, however, diminish his longing for Laura.

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But on Wednesday when he attempted to kiss her, she blocked his face with her hand.

"We need to talk," she said.

He backed off. Here it comes, he thought. "All right. Talk."

"While it may be difficult to believe, on Saturday night my husband and I actually made love to each other."

Made love. She sounded so pretentious, as if her having sex with her husband were an event of cosmic significance. "Funny you should say that. The other night, my wife and I did the same."

She grabbed his shoulder. "How wonderful!" she said.

He brushed away her hand. "So that's it? You're leaving me? You're going back to your husband?"

"First of all," she said, "I never left him, and I was never with you." She raised her eyebrows, gazing at him in a way that seemed horribly condescending. "Look, it was an enjoyable experience for me as well. It was. But it's over. I just feel I'm past the point of hooking up with random guys I met on the internet. Because let's face it, if I'm going to have children, I'm working within a limited timeframe."

Tom laughed. "Oh, so now motherhood is your priority?" He circled his right hand around his left wrist, gripping it firmly. "Last week, it was that the cuffs were tight enough that you couldn't break out of them."

Her tone hardened, her expression becoming more severe. "I believe I made it clear from the outset that my situation was complicated. I believe I also specified 'minimal strings.'"

No more Wednesdays to look forward to. The thought left him feeling broken and hollow.

"I better get going," she said. "Here, let me pay for today. It's forty dollars, right?"

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Tom added the sheets and pillow case to the dirty clothes in the laundry basket. Zach could have them.

Displaying the same precision that Beth expected of him at home, Tom prepared Zach's bed. He folded and tucked in the sheet, put the pillows in place, and smoothed the comforter.

The pair of twenty dollar bills that Laura had contributed rested on the nightstand.

Sitting on the futon, Tom reached inside the blue bag. He touched the blindfold, then the restraints. Leaving them behind as another donation to Zach would have been the more prudent course of action, but he wasn't ready to part with them just yet.

Tom folded the top of the bag to obscure its contents. Holding it close to his body, he rode the subway uptown.

He settled on the story he would tell Beth. Her reaction to it, he felt, would be a good litmus test of their relationship as a whole. If it repulsed her, then it was fair to say that he repulsed her.

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In the hallway outside his apartment, he paused before letting himself in. The sound of the television leaked through the door. Beth must have come home early.

The garbage chute was less than twenty feet away. Tossing the bag down it was still an option. He hesitated, not moving until the click of a neighbor's lock spurred him to action. He went in.

Beth sat on the couch in her bathrobe, her hair still wet. She seldom watched television, and just seeing her in that position was unusual for him.

"Hey," he said. "What's going on?"

She aimed the remote and turned off the TV. "I had an incident at the office. I nearly passed out in the middle of a meeting."

"What?" Tom removed his shoes, then his jacket.

"I skipped breakfast and worked like crazy all morning, having nothing but coffee."

He hung his jacket in the closet. "Yeah. And?"

"While listening to one of my esteemed colleagues rattle on, I felt the conference room start to sway, like we were on a boat."

He sat beside her, slipping his fingers inside the collar of her robe. She lifted her leg, resting it on his knees.

"You okay now?"

She nodded, laying her head on his shoulder. "I think so. They brought me a banana and a bagel. And some orange juice. I ate it all. My boss told me to go home and rest." She grabbed the bag. "So what's this?"

He pulled it out of her reach. "It's something Zach gave me. I just met him for lunch."

She looked at him warily. "What is it?"

"Something you may or may not have an issue with."

Disengaging from him, Beth slid to the end of the couch.

"Zach and his latest girlfriend split up. He was pretty depressed about it. Her tastes were kind of kinky." Tom lifted the bag. "He said having this around reminded him of her and made him feel worse, so I agreed to take it off his hands."

She took the bag and opened it. Smiling, she pulled out one of the straps. "And why were you so interested in it?"

"I don't know," he said. "I was curious."

With a self-assurance that stunned him, she fastened the velcro around her wrist, then yanked on the tether.

He felt the sort of spark he had not known his wife was still capable of provoking. "You've done this sort of thing before."

She shrugged, a playful smile on her face. "You're not the only one with a history."

As far as he knew, she had only been with three guys before him. All had seemed like complete dorks. "Which one was into this?"

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"I hardly think that's relevant," she said, coloring her voice with feigned offense. She undid the cuff and held it near his face. "So I'm to believe you have no experience with this variety of human behavior?"

He shook his head. "No. None whatsoever."

She emptied the bag's contents onto the coffee table. "No leash?"

"No," he said, catching himself, nearly adding, what's in the bag was all we used.

"Then we'll have to improvise." She blindfolded him, then asked, "Are you ready to do as I say?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Remove your shirt and socks."

He did as she asked, tossing them aside. She wrapped the tether under his arms, then secured it to itself.

She tugged gently. "Is that too tight?"

"No. It's fine."

"Now your pants." He took them off and handed them to her. She flung them aside.

Her lips were close to his ear, her voice soft and beguiling. "On your knees. Now."

He came down from the couch, the carpet pleasantly rough against his skin.

She pulled the strap. "Crawl," she commanded.

Tingling with excitement, he obeyed.