

## Your Quiet Affair

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Your affair with Connie Gervais starts the way you imagine most do. You just turned forty-five, your wife, Delia, is picking up extra shifts at Wiener World's packaging plant to pay for your daughter's first year at college, and, well, you simply begin to want something you're not supposed to have. You want to fulfill some teenage fantasy. Have a woman tell you firmly and with conviction to bark like a goddamn dog, tell you something, anything, other than not to forget to take out the trash because it is Tuesday.

That's how you find yourself, on an ordinary Monday in December, tripping over mops and buckets in the janitor's closet during lunch period at the middle school where you teach Phys Ed, with Connie, who teaches English, pulling at your clothes and telling you, like she has during each of your illicit encounters which started just before Halloween, that you've been a very bad boy. She pushes you onto a desk, it rocks, and you have to readjust your weight when you discover the desk only has three legs. You end up laid out on the tiny Formica surface, arms and legs splayed like a starfish for balance. Connie shakes her hair loose from some metal contraption that keeps her hair corralled into a bun and pulls the skin on her face taut, and when too tight, she looks slightly Chinese, which you happen to find exotic and even more exciting. She leans down and is undoing your zipper with her teeth when the PA system sounds in the quiet hallway outside the closet door. Through the painfully slow *clink, clink, clink* of the zipper's metal separating, you can hear static, a hi-frequency tone from the PA's microphone being too close to a radio or television set, and in the mess of all that noise—your name.

There can be any number of reasons for the office to call you: you've left the lights of your car on (after all it was dark when you drove in to work that morning—would be every morning until April when the sun would finally show up before 7:00 a.m. in the raw, New England sky), one of the more unathletic kids has been caught skipping gym and found in the library, asleep, or maybe Ed McMahon is outside with one of those poster board checks for you. It's possible. Not likely, but possible. And just as you decide whatever it is can wait until you are finished with your latest lesson, you hear your name again, this time closer. Stephen Kearny, the vice principal's thirty-five-year-old son who still lives at home and works as the school's secretary is running down

the hall calling your name. At the sound of footsteps so close, Connie pulls herself up too quickly. She teeters and then falls on you at an awkward angle, pushing too much weight to the corner of the desk that is missing a leg, and you both tumble off the desk and into the door, which evidently hasn't been secured because it shoots open and you find yourself on top of the seventh-grade English teacher with the vice principal's secretary/son standing over both of you.

It could be an awkward moment if you hadn't caught Stephen sniffing glue in the supply room last year. In your mind this merely makes you even in the indiscretion department, so you pull yourself up, tuck your shirt in, and zip your fly up like it's the most normal thing in the world. "You called?"

Connie, a new teacher at the school, gives Stephen a coy smile and then gathers, pulls, and twists her hair until it is smoothed away into a neat knot. You and Stephen both watch her move down the hall until she turns the corner and enters the humanities wing.

"There's something you should see," Stephen says. But he is clearly rattled by Connie and is staring after her. You snap your fingers in front of Stephen's glasses before he turns and then bolts back to the office.

You follow and find a group of teachers surrounding a small black and white television set which is tuned in to the twelve o'clock news. The teachers part for you to get a better look. There is a shaky live shot from the news station's helicopter as it circles some sort of factory where plumes of black smoke bubble from the building's gray concrete. A phone rings in the office and as you watch the bottom ticker name Wiener World's packaging plant as the location of the explosion, the phone receiver is pushed against your ear. You're having a hard time hearing, the connection is poor, and there's a pounding in your ears, blood flowing back to various places in your body. You feel a tremor in your chest and for a moment think you are having a heart attack. All you hear is: explosion, Delia, hospital.

In the car your mind races with how you will explain to your eighteen-year-old daughter that her mother was killed at her workplace while you'd been fooling around with fellow faculty. Of course there is no connection between the two, and they said on the phone Delia is okay, (okay as anyone can be after being in an explosion), but guilt has a way of making you imagine the worst scenario possible. This isn't anything new. As a child you'd stolen a pack of Black Jack gum and considered this theft the source of every cavity for the rest of your life, a root canal when you were twenty-five serving as late penance. You grew up in a strict Catholic home. Guilt to you is necessary—like sun for plants.

You turn the radio up as the music stops and the disc jockey cuts into a breaking news bulletin. *There was an explosion at Wiener World, where two factory workers were injured operating the plant's new Linker 2000x20.* You roll through a stop sign, speed up as you cross the intersection. *The Linker was expected to increase production in the factory. It only needed two operators and would fill, link, and hang the sausages at an astounding rate of 200,000 sausages an hour.* You slam the turn signal down and make a left, but after the turn, the blinker stays engaged. You try to pull it up to its original position but it falls back down, ticking time with the flashing of its green arrow. *Only the flick of a switch was required to go from edible to skinless casings. Management reported hopes that the machine would up their productivity so they could expand their regional distribution.* You can't believe this is happening. "Fucking hotdogs!"

You live in a small town and you know that an explosion of any sort, be it flaming bags of dog shit or exploding wiener plants, is the kind of thing that will be talked about for weeks, even months. It is no surprise when the disc jockey delays returning to the music in favor of asking listeners to call in with their own sausage stories. Humorous or serious.

A nurse leads you to Delia's exam room in the ER. You peek around the curtain and see her sitting at the edge of a bed in her work clothes. She's wearing a pair of ratty jeans, a flannel shirt, and the familiar floor length overcoat. That coat is generally covered with the parts of a pig you choose to ignore that make up the bulk of what gets stuffed into those casings. Today is no exception. Both her hands are bandaged, limp in her lap, and her eyes are fixed on the floor. You aren't sure if you should enter or not.

A man with a white lab coat, running shorts, and sneakers walks up next to you and you step away from the curtain. He shakes your hand. "I'm Dr. Parks. You must be Delia's husband?"

It's ten degrees below zero and this guy looks like he is going to go for a run on the beach. "Yes, I am." You take a better look at him. He's pretty fit, though, and you find this oddly comforting and nod in appraisal.

"Delia is lucky. Minor burns on her hands, but they should heal nicely."

"So I can take her home?"

"Yes, but I would like to give you my number. I'm the otologist on staff at this hospital."

"Oh, Jesus," you say, running both hands through your closely cropped hair. "You found cancer?"

"Um, no. I specialize in ear injuries," he grabs the lobe of his ear and gives it a tug.

"Oh, I see."

He smiles at your faux pas, but not in a belittling manner, and you find yourself liking this guy. Taking care of Delia would have been enough, but you don't feel stupid around him. Not something you can say for most doctors.

"Your wife has some hearing damage. It's too soon to tell if it's permanent or not but she can't hear at all out of either ear. Evidently when that linking machine went off it was like a cannon."

"Ah, yes. The linking machine." You wonder if Parks knows how many sausages that thing could link per hour and as soon as you think about the ridiculous statistic, you realize it's an entirely inappropriate thought. Perhaps you are in shock. It's possible.

"From what I could make out from the other employee, some tank exploded. Your wife happened to be behind a stack of packed boxes so when the machine came apart the boxes acted like a shield. She burned her hands on the doorknob trying to get out." Dr. Parks pulls out a card. "It could be months, years, or her hearing might come back tomorrow. Just give her time. Be patient. She'll come around."

You slip the card inside your parka, pull the curtain back again, and step toward your wife. "Delia?"

No response.

You notice there is no pillow on the hospital bed. A not-so-normal habit—looking to make sure there's a pillow on every bed you encounter—developing years back because of Delia. Never one to rock the boat, she once went an entire weekend without a pillow the time that you visited your parents' house, just before you got engaged. Your mother simply forgot to put one in there when she made up the guest room, but Delia wasn't even assertive enough to ask for something as simple as a pillow. She only mentioned the absent pillow once you were both on the plane, 30,000 feet up, and headed 600 miles away from your parents.

You keep walking closer, calling her name softly, and are in her line of vision when she turns, looks up, and smiles at you. You can't be sure if she's heard you or seen you.

At home, you pull out a chair at the kitchen table for Delia. You flick on the evening news and there it is again, aerial shots of Wiener World with smoke filling the slate gray sky. Delia looks at the scenes with what seems like detached interest, like she is watching a cooking show, watching someone explain tax law, watching anything other than the very thing she's been a part of that day. You call Taylor in her dorm room in Ohio.

“Hey, Sport. It’s your old man.”

“Dad?”

“Who else?” You grab a pot, fill it with water and set it on the stove.

“Well, you’ve never called me Sport before. Never referred to yourself as anything but young and strapping, which, by the way I find to be odd, Dad. Honestly, I really do. What’s with the old man bit?”

There’s a long pause.

“Are you and Mom finally getting divorced?”

You flinch. Your daughter’s voice is deadpan, like the two of you are co-workers standing at the water cooler, shooting the breeze over how the company is stifling you on your photocopying privileges. “There was an accident at your mom’s work today.” You hear the music in the background soften. “She’s fine. Some hearing damage that we’ll have to wait and see about and a few burns on her hands.” Taylor’s breath catches on the other end. Delia is now trying to change the TV station, but the bandages make it difficult. “She’s gonna be fine. Nothing for you to worry about. Really.”

“Can I talk to her?” Taylor’s voice lacks concern. It is more accusatory than anything else, like you’re making this whole thing up.

“Well she can’t hear right now—weren’t you listening to me?”

“This is so like you,” and the line goes dead.

You don’t know how *this* could be like you. You made a viable point to an obviously off-base question. If *that* was like you then you are fine with *that*. You snap stalks of spaghetti, toss them into the pot, then turn the burner on.

“I tell him five million times to boil the water first, *then* put the pasta in!”

You wheel around at the voice of your wife, loud, almost screaming.

“What?” you ask.

But Delia continues to smile at you and shakes her head and casts her gaze down. What comes next is just as loud: “I can’t hear you, asshole.”

You grab a pen and a notebook—the one used for grocery lists—and sit at the table with Delia. Under *Canned Tomatoes*, *Honey Roasted Peanuts*, and *Tampons (the super kind)* you write: *What did you just say?*

She picks up the pen, a pained look on her face. *I didn’t say anything...I was just mumbling to myself.*

You push yourself away from the table and stand at the stove, your back to your wife. As you heat some spaghetti sauce from a jar, you think about how Delia is quiet. Your wife is a small, fragile person that at times you’re afraid might completely disappear. She is also a notorious mumblor. A trait she has passed on to Taylor. You’ve spent most of your adult life trying to explain to Taylor’s teachers that it isn’t an imaginary friend she is talking to,

it’s not Asperger’s, and she’s not autistic. Couldn’t they simply respect some inner dialogue?

You place the spaghetti in front of Delia and try to smile, but you feel your face screw up and a tic twitches in your cheek so that you must look like you are having a minor seizure rather than trying to smile. Your wife has never called you an asshole. Meek and mild Delia, to your knowledge, has never used a curse word in her life. But she can’t hold a fork now either, not with the bandages, so you feed her. One bite at a time.

“Is there any possibility, Dr. Parks, that she might have, you know, brain damage?” You push papers around on your desk at school. It’s your lunch break and the first chance you’ve had all day to have some time to yourself. And, on only her first day at home after the accident, Delia has made it clear she wanted some time *and* the house to herself.

“We performed a thorough exam at the hospital.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m not trying to tell you how to do your job or anything. But, seriously. Should you give her an MRI or something? She’s said some stuff that is completely out of her character.”

“Such as?” He sounds concerned.

“Well, she called me an asshole for starters.”

“Forgive me for asking, but were you being an asshole?” Parks sounds genuine in his concern where you are convinced any other doctor would have hung up on you by now.

“No.” You pause. You were cheating on your wife, yes. But she did not know about that. You were merely trying to make spaghetti, damn it. “No. Definitely not.”

“Listen, we ran preliminary tests. She showed no signs of brain trauma. If any of the other tests come back with problems then we will call you.” He gives a slight pause and you can imagine that in person, this is where he would put his hand on your shoulder and look knowingly into your eyes. “You just need to give her time. She’s been through a traumatic experience. Be patient. She’ll come around.”

And just like that you have a mantra for the first time in your life. Be patient. She’ll come around. Be patient.

During your free period on Wednesday, Connie uses an old wooden pointing stick and pushes you up against a shelf of cleaning supplies. “You’re a bad boy who needs a spanking.” She slaps the pointer in her opposite palm.

The smacking sound should have sent chills up and down your spine. Today, however, you feel nothing, nothing but the twinges of guilt over you being here and Delia being at home, but you pull Connie closer and begin to unbutton her silk blouse anyway. She leans in and you smell vanilla on her neck, hot cinnamon on her breath.

“I think you should leave your wife.” Her voice is soft in your ear.

“Whoa.” You push her back.

“That’s what a bad boy would do.” She tries to lean in again, her eyelids heavy with that sleepy look of desire.

“I’m not leaving my wife, Connie.”

“How is your wife doing?” Her voice is full of an intimacy that rings false to you.

“That’s none of your business.”

“Oh, no? Then what are we doing?” She steps away and folds her arms across her chest.

You look around the closet, look her up and down. “I thought we were going to have sex.” Leaving your wife has never really been an option. At least you didn’t think so.

“Where are ‘we’ going?” she asks.

“We,” you say, glancing down at your watch, “are going back to work now. I thought ‘we’ agreed what happens in this closet stays in here?” You open the door, look into the corridor. “Coming?”

She’s sitting on one of the overturned buckets, her knees touching, feet spread wide apart, looking like you’ve just sent her to the corner for doing something wrong. “In a bit. Go ahead without me.”

You turn to leave, but her voice stops you. “Tomorrow?”

It’s as easy as that to keep an affair going if you choose.

When you come home from work, you find Delia in the bathroom, plastic bags over the bandages on her hands, struggling to turn the water off in the shower. There are soapy bubbles in her hair, so you help her back into the tub and work your hands through her hair until it rinses clear. You dry her hair, tie it in a loose ponytail at the base of her neck, and she gestures to her face indicating you’ll need to do her make-up, too. You lean in, examining the familiar lines of your Deel’s face, finding new ones around the edges of her eyes, the corners of her mouth. You’re nervous and she can tell.

“Don’t make me look stupid,” she says and pulls back, her volume control still off a bit.

In the steam of the mirror, you write: *never*. But when you look back at her she looks apprehensive, like you are just trying to pull a fast one on her. Your hands tremble at first as she points out make-up you should use, but it’s a big, sweeping gesture with those bandaged hands and you select the wrong things more than once from her drawer under the sink. She patiently shakes her head, *no*, with each misstep, and blushes when you pull out a white tube. Tossing it back in the drawer, the tube lands so that you can read the name on it: *Vagisil*. *That*, you know, is not for the face.

After some false starts, including an incident with the eyeliner which made her look like Cleopatra, and a touch too much of the powder, so that she would have made a great Casper, you eventually get it right. You line her eyelids, brush mascara through her lashes, powder her cheeks, forehead, dust under the tip of her nose, and slide the lip gloss along her lips. And when you’re done, you have the urge to wipe it all off and reapply everything over and over again to prove that you would never make her look stupid. But then you think of Connie and know you’ve already gone and done just that.

Later, you order the Pupu Platter for two and lo mein at your favorite Chinese restaurant. Delia looks over the menu and shouts, “Goddamn expensive eggrolls.” Then she gazes downward and starts fiddling with the napkin in her lap.

You sit across from one another in a red vinyl booth near the window that looks out onto the strip mall’s parking lot. A Hummer pulls up and a woman gets out and runs into the restaurant to pick up some take-out.

“Polluting, gas-guzzling dickheads.” Delia goes back to fiddling with the napkin in her lap.

You smile to ease the tension as the woman grabs her brown bag of food and looks over at your wife like she’s going to give Delia some hell. The woman takes a step in your direction. “Well, really...,” you begin in your most diplomatic voice, the one usually reserved for faculty meetings at school. The one you use when you can see that if someone doesn’t do something soon, you’ll lose a whole Friday night just because someone refuses to give up their cappuccino machine and accept generic coffee in the lounge so that the school can buy higher quality air filters each month. “Lady, look at that thing, it’s like a tank.”

“The weather here is foul,” she snaps back at you, adjusting her take-out bags, and striding outside. When she tries to climb into the Hummer, you notice she has to rock her body to get enough momentum to heave herself up inside the vehicle. Sure the weather is bad in New England, you think, but not Anchorage-Alaska bad, and surely not military-warzone-necessitating-an-all-terrain-vehicle bad.

Delia is looking out the window, her bandaged hands folded beneath her chin, a placid 'isn't-this-a-nice-evening' expression on her face. "Because the off-roading in suburbia is fan-friggin-tastic," she bellows.

You laugh so hard your knees hit the table. A pot of tea spills over. Delia looks your way, concern flashing across her face as she springs up and pulls you out of the booth, tries to give you the Heimlich maneuver. It feels like a first date with the awkward stumbling around and desire to please the person across from you and you assure her that you are fine, take out a pen and on her Chinese Zodiac placemat write: *I'm fine. You're funny. I love you.* And she looks up at you, confused, as if to say: what the hell do any of those things have to do with one another?

On Friday at school, you go to the gym during lunch and use the phone in your office. You dial Taylor's number and a male voice answers.

"I'm sorry. I must've dialed the wrong number." You hang up and try again.

"Hello?" The guy seems irritated now.

"Sorry, guy. Just looking for my daughter, Taylor," and are about to hang up thinking you'd copied her number down wrong when you left the house.

"Oh." A pause. "Taylor, phone for you." There's the sound of the phone's receiver trying to be covered. "Your dad, man." And, "What does he want so early?"

You check your watch. It's 11:45 a.m.

"Hey, Dad." She sounds bored and sleepy the way seven-year-olds are when they first wake up.

"Your mom is doing well. Thought you'd like to know since I haven't heard from you." You want to throw in that any guy that calls her 'man' is not someone you want her to ever bring home, but think better of it.

"I haven't called because she can't hear, remember?"

"But I can. You can call me. I can hear just fine." You look up and see Connie standing in the doorway, an expectant look on her face. You swivel your chair around and lower your voice. "You're not having sex with that guy, are you? I mean your mother and I took you to church every Sunday. We taught you better."

"Oh, Dad," Taylor sighs. "Do you really believe that?"

She hangs up on you, again. But you don't replace the receiver right away, you let the line buzz in your ear until Connie walks away and you try to recall the exact moment when your daughter fell out of love with you.

You tap the end of your pencil on your desk. Connie is getting too daring, too demanding. You made an agreement to not seek one another out like

that. If one of you doesn't don't show up in the closet during lunch, no big deal, leave and try again during fifth period, when you both have free periods. Never, ever, just stop in. Never 'talk.' And that's what the look on her face had suggested. She wants to 'talk.' Problem is—you have nothing to say. But you want to fix things somehow. Fix things with Connie. Fix things with Delia. So, before entirely thinking things through, you write a quick note, trying to match Connie's handwriting, and thinking of the way Connie had smiled at Stephen, the exact smile she'd given you once upon a time, and make your way to the faculty mailboxes. You drop the note off, then turn to take it back, but the vice principal walks in and you don't want to be suspected of stealing her son's mail, so you smile and leave.

When fifth period comes around, you wait. You wait for Connie to come in and spit fire at you and call you every single name in the book, but she doesn't. You watch the second hand on the clock motor around and around, but still nothing. Then a horrible, mind-crumbing sound. The fire alarm. "Oh, God. She's burning down the damn school."

You grab your jacket off the back of your chair, not knowing how long you will be forced to stand outside, trying to recall if it's Mondays or Fridays when employees are most likely to go 'postal' at their places of employment, and shut the door to your office. In the halls, children scream and run; teachers demand quiet and movement in an 'orderly fashion.' You spot the principal standing at the end of one of the halls, stopwatch in hand, and you breathe a sigh of relief. It's just a fire drill. You are all failing miserably, but at least Connie hasn't decided to take the whole lot of them out in a blaze of glory. Kids bump against you and you are pushed against a door which starts to open, revealing none other than Stephen and Connie. Stephen's shirt is inside-out.

You stop at the flower shop and buy a dozen roses. It's something you have not done for Delia since the two of you were dating and regret that it's been so long since you have done something so very small. In December, roses are very out of season. You start adding up monthly bills in your mind as the clerk makes out the receipt, an old habit when it feels like there's never enough money left over at the end of the month, but it doesn't matter. Delia will be getting disability and there is already an offer for a settlement from the factory's insurance company, so you aren't too worried about paying for Taylor's spring semester at college, or the rest of her college for that matter.

When you get home you check the messages on the machine. There is one from a telemarketer and one from Dr. Parks. "Just wanted to call and confirm

that all of Delia's tests came back normal. Aside from the hearing and burns, your wife couldn't be better. Keep me posted on her progress." As usual his voice is nothing but kind and confident. A combination you are still having trouble believing exists in a real person.

You delete the message and see that the television is on in the living room. There is techno music as a commercial ends and a show resumes where models pose before an aquamarine sea, white sand like bleach against their tanned, honey skin. The show cuts away again, this time two models are running toward each other, leaping, timing it just right so that they face each other in airborne splits. They shake their heads like neighing ponies, trying to get the wind to catch their long manes. Delia must have fallen asleep with the television on. There is no way, you think, she would ever watch frolicking swimsuit models.

You start toward the kitchen and catch sight of your wife in the hallway, leaping toward your bedroom. White bandaged hands fluff her hair in an imaginary wind and Taylor's large, neon-green alligator slippers kick out in tiny leaps from Delia's feet. Her split leaps are not athletic—knees bent, housecoat keeping them in check. It looks more like she is trying to jump over a small puddle, but you've never seen anything as sexy in your entire life.

When she hits the end of the hallway, she turns as if to make another pass down the runway of a fashion show, but stops when she sees you, her eyes wide, as wide as the plastic plum-sized eyes on the slippers. You throw the flowers on the couch and rush down the hall doing split leaps of your own. You catch Delia around her thin waist and carry her back to the bedroom.

You kiss her cheek and she rolls toward you on the bed, a tangle of arms exploring familiar territory. And, yet, things are different.

Delia has always been quiet in bed, any utterance kept to a barely audible whisper, but not now. "Oh, my!" and "Yes! Yes!" is screamed at you and you can barely control yourself. "Yes! Like a train!"

Like a train? Is this the kind of thing she usually says but you can never hear? The neighbors might come over and ask if everything is all right, what with the screaming, but you don't care. Christmas is coming early this year and you lean in toward her right ear and whisper, "Is it good, Deel?"

"Oh, choo choo!"

You decide right then and there you are going to buy a model train set the next day. You might even buy a conductor's hat. You get a little more adventurous. "Are you a good Deel? Or a bad Deel?"

"Yeah!"

"I think you're a Deel gone bad. Are you a bad Deel?"

"Yes!"

And on it goes. But by the end, you know the two of you are speaking different languages to one another and you stop trying to talk dirty to her and just whisper quiet shushing noises. You curl up next to your wife and tuck her head under your chin, her breathing now soft against your throat. Tracing the edges of her ear, over and over again, you make the half a heart curve with the tip of your finger until she is asleep, and can slip away to the bathroom where you sit in the quiet loneliness of the dark. In the past few days, you have, for the first time, really heard your wife. And she is a wild creature, electric to the touch, and utterly beautiful. A complete stranger.

Taylor calls in the middle of the night. Drunk. "I'm shitty," she says.

There are so many things this could mean, but you decide to remain quiet, let her go on. Delia stirs in the bed next to you, pulls the covers up so that her feet stick out at the end. You look down at your own feet. You are doing the exact same thing.

"You know what your problem is..."

"Taylor, honey. Are you all right? I know there's a lot going on with your mom and you've got school, and, er, a boyfriend of sorts. You can talk to me. You know that, right?"

"No. No, my yoga instructor told me my chakras are all sorts of blocked up." Her words slur in and out and you think at one point she is speaking Spanish, but she only knows fourth-grade-level French. "You're a can of peas. Peas, Daddy." It's clear she will not give you the sort of father-daughter moment that you were hoping to have. "Peas," she continues. "Tiny. Split. Peas." She hangs up for the third time this week. You are getting used to that now from her, although you lean over and pull a pad of paper out of the nightstand and write down *chakras*. You roll over and watch Delia sleeping, her face angry at something or someone in her dreams. Probably you, you think. You will get a book on yoga tomorrow, you will buy notebooks and pens for every room of the house, you will never put spaghetti in a pot again unless the water is at a full boil. You will do your damndest so that your wife, and even your daughter, never think you are an asshole again.

Be patient. She'll come around. Be patient. ☺