

1-1-2005

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Recommended Citation

Watson, Brad (2005) "Are You Mr. Lonelee?," *Yalobusha Review*. Vol. 10 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/yr/vol10/iss1/19>

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Brad Watson

Are You Mr. Lonelee?

I thought I heard a woman sneaking up on me in the grass. This is the predatory season for women, when men lie pale and naked in their yards like dazed birds. I let my head drop casually over the side of the lawn chair, open one eye, look. No woman. It could have been the birds.

You never know what will come up from behind, I say. I take a shot from my flask and shift in the lawn chair. Even the mailman, crossing the yard to the neighbor's house, can make me jump and stare.

Two days ago this woman snuck up on me and watched me for five minutes before I knew she was there. I jumped up and the beer resting on my stomach spilled.

"Look out, there, cowboy," she said.

She was stunning. Very young, tall, and tanned, wearing jeans and a tee-shirt that didn't cover her browned belly, where there was a single gold ring piercing her out-y navel. Her hair, maybe a natural blonde, was cut short and stood up on her head as if she'd been permanently surprised, but her expression was calm. She sat down on the edge of the lawn chair and took a sip of what was left of my beer.

"Are you Conroy?"

I nodded and kind of stared at her navel. "Who are you?"

She drained the rest of my beer.

"Names, man," she said with a little laugh from her throat.

"All right," I said. "Fine," for I'd been trying to loosen up a little the last few months.

"I got your name off the mailbox," she said.

She ended up moving in with me that day. I invited her in for a colder beer and she didn't leave for two days. I think she was just hungry, mostly. I took a shower and when I came out she was at the kitchen sink, ripping pieces off a cold roast chicken I'd had in the fridge since Friday afternoon.

During those two days, she took about eight showers, walking naked from the billowing steam of the bathroom and padding about the place drip-drying or coming up to me and pressing herself into my clothes until I was wet, too, and when I took them off she pulled me into the bedroom, or onto

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the sofa or the floor. She pinned me down and rode me, come to think of it, like I was one of those mechanical bulls in bars.

It was like, “Come, on, Conroy! Yeah!” I think she even slapped my thigh one time.

I looked up at her from the laundry room floor, my head wedged into a pile of wet towels. “This is going too far,” I said. “You must tell me your name.”

“Sylvia,” she said.

“Sylvia,” I said. “Okay.”

I was satisfied with that. But you can never tell what will come up from behind. I take another shot from the flask and close my eyes, let the sun burn the liquid out again. I’m getting brown, burning down to the muscle. All I seem to want is purge.

Four months ago, my wife died. I’ve tried hard not to think of her since, but it’s proved almost impossible.

My house is full of her things: left-over prescription bottles, a makeup kit, patent leather shoes and sneakers and dainty sandals, a diaphragm, hair curlers, old grocery lists, wrinkled blouses packed into the backs of drawers, notes asking me to meet her at church that night, hundreds of useless pots and pans, dumb aphorisms on laquered plaques, sheets and towels with the initials of her maiden name sewn in. The list could go on. I can’t seem to throw or give any of it away. I sleep with one of her favorite old quilts at the foot of my bed.

A month or so after her death, I decided I was going to get away from the house for a while, rent it out, let someone else bother with the mess. I put an ad in the paper and almost immediately this enormous, red-faced, blonde-haired woman answered. I interviewed her in my den.

It took me a minute to realize how fat she really was. She had trouble getting through the front door. Her enormous ass took up half the space of the single bed I used for a sofa, not just half the length, but a full half the bed, front to back. The sound of her heavy breathing sucked me in, I was inside her fatty, seething lungs. I said to myself, I have never seen anyone so fat before.

I rented her my house, though. Partly because I’d have hated to refuse her just because she was so fat. But also because I had the strange feeling that the house would be safe with her. She promised not to try to sit in my wife’s old rocker and I rented the place to her then and there. It was kind of her to bring this up herself.

My wife and I had run a two-person ad shop downtown in the Threefoot Building. I’d often worked there until very late so I’d fixed up with a small

daybed for catnaps. There was a men's room down the hall where I could take bird baths. I lived there for almost a month.

Things went fine until one night, Crews, the night watchman, dropped in on me with a bottle of cheap bourbon.

"You look like you could use a drink, Mr. Conroy."

"Well, I haven't had a drink in three weeks."

Crews struck a pose with the bottle, hand poised to unscrew the top.

I thought about it a moment and motioned him in.

"Don't call me Mr. Conroy," I said. "Just Conroy."

"Oh, yes, last names," Crews said. "Talk like gentlemen."

"Oh, yes," I said, "at the club."

"Indeed," Crews said, and he poured me a slug of the bourbon into one of the Dixie Cups he'd brought with him.

We had a pretty good time. Crews waltzed around with a dust mop and sang a blues song about a whore and a black Cadillac. He sang, "Good Mornin, Little Schoolgirl." He snapped his fingers and imitated Louis Armstrong. I did the trumpet, laid back on my bed. We got awfully drunk. I started pissing out the window of my office, watching the stream fall fourteen floors through the neon lights of old downtown. Crews ran over and stuck his dirty old Security cap under me, yelling, "Wait, don't piss on the street, it's an *offense!*" I went ahead and emptied into his cap, and by God the old fool shook it out, put it back on his head, and grinned at me with his perfect white teeth.

I was disgusted.

"That wasn't very bright, Crews. You show me you're a dumbass."

"I ain't no dumbass," he said, still grinning. "I'm just drunk."

Then he got mad about me calling him a dumbass and paced around a bit, pouting, and said, "Shouldn't say things like that to a man's face, unless you really mean it."

He looked at me hard. Then he noticed the wedding band I still wore on my finger.

"You're a married man," he said, matter-of-factly. "Where's your wife?"

"My wife's dead. If it's any your business."

He cocked his head and regarded me.

"Your wife ain't dead," he finally said. "I know your wife, seen her up here with you many a time. And I saw her, *just yesterday*, hanging out with some weird looking dudes down at the Triangle, eating some of them Chik-Steaks."

"I think maybe you just ought to get the fuck out of here, Crews."

There was a half-inch of bourbon left in the bottle. Crews picked it up, real dignified and indignant, and walked to the door. Then he stopped, turned around, and narrowed his eyes dramatically. This guy'd been through the video store. I could tell.

“My wife,” he said, “she’s *really* dead. I don’t need to manufacture no grief.”

I reached for one of my wife’s old calligraphy pens and hurled it at him just as he cleared the door.

But Crews was right. My wife wasn’t really dead.

She was an oddly pious woman I’d married because, I suppose, we were both studying public relations at the same school, took almost all the same classes, and just didn’t really know anyone else. We were shy and awkward and it was just easier to be around someone as painfully self-conscious as yourself.

She was pious, but I always thought there was another side to her trying to get out somehow. When we made love she shouted profanity, something she never indulged in her daily life, a sin she cried about in church sometimes, weeping quietly as we sat in the cold hard pew.

Then she had an accident on her Moped one day. She wasn’t wearing a helmet and suffered a severe concussion. When she woke up, she was a different person. She was not the woman I had married. That would have been all right with me, I think I was ready to open up a little bit, but it wasn’t all right with her.

She became her opposite, said I was a nice man but too conservative. Why did we have to live alone? Why not move in with the Tisdale Group?

“Who the hell is the Tisdale Group?” I said.

“Well, they’re artists. Painters,” she said, leaning her head to one side and sticking a finger in her ear. The finger in the ear was a peculiar habit she’d picked up since the accident. As if she were listening to something inside there, receiving signals about what she should do or say next.

She leaned her head to one side and gave me a kind of vacant smile.

“They live in this old house over by the park and everything is just, I don’t know, free, or freed up. You know what I mean?”

“Not really.”

She put her finger back into her ear and wandered off into her studio.

And she moved in with the Tisdale Group. They smoked a lot of dope, painted with oils, and rode Harley Davidsons. My wife said she couldn’t stand our home anymore, with all the blasé décor—her words. The décor she’d so carefully collected and arranged. After weeks of trying to coax her home, I gave up. She’s dead, I told myself. My wife is dead.

And that’s the way I’ve left it.

After Crews left, I drove to Midway, an all-night bootleg joint, bought a bottle of sour mash and hit the streets. I became Lex Conroy, pervert. Whenever I saw teenaged girls on the streets, walking home from the bowling alley or a late movie, I whistled and yowled at them from my car. Then I decided harassing young girls wasn’t all that perverse. It had to be

young boys. But the first group of striplings I came across, I chickened out. What if, after all, I should be recognized? For most of the night after that, I just drove around and drank the whiskey.

At 4 a.m. I was so crooked I didn't know where I was and got lost. I was driving down a wide street and had it all to myself. Maybe that was what threw me off. A road with no cars, houses with no lights – and the streetlamps, always a blurred glow in the distance, seemed a beckoning from somewhere far away.

From there it was automatic.

I'd had nearly a whole bottle of whiskey and all my reckoning finally collapsed. I ended up in front of my house, jamming the spare key into the lock. I completely forgot about the enormous fat woman I had rented it to, forgot she was living there at the time.

I was still on automatic, moving through the living room with my arms outstretched in the dark, my eyes nearly swollen shut with booze, sleepwalking toward the bed fully clothed. But I'd fallen only halfway to where the mattress should have been when I hit something soft but firm, bounced off onto the floor and rolled over onto my back, dazed – only to see this massive shape blot out the moonlight coming through the bedroom window. She screamed, a high-pitched one for such a large woman. Then I screamed, too, to let her know she was not the only hysterical person in the house.

She paused, then screamed again, and didn't stop until she had pulled a giant, Navaronnian revolver from the bed table drawer and fired off a deafening round. I dove for the hallway just as she fired again, taking off a hunk of doorjamb above my shoulder. She screamed again and I heard something wrench and then a kind of twanging. I lay tense for a moment, then turned around to see her immense ass framing the area where the lower half of the bedroom window had been. She'd tried to dive out through the screen.

I ran around to the back door but when I stuck my head out she fired at me from her hanging position. The bullet popped into the asbestos siding of my next-door neighbor's house.

"Miss Duke!" I shouted. "It's me, Conroy, your landlord! Don't shoot!"

"Conroy! Oh, God!"

I peeked around the doorjamb and saw that her arms were hanging limp, and she was kind of bouncing, her arms jiggling around. When I got closer I could tell she was weeping, and one huge pale tit had fallen out of her gown.

"Please help me, Mr. Conroy." Her head hung down, her mussed hair all around it, nearly touching the dew-laced grass. I pushed and heaved at her, she grunted and pulled, until finally she squeezed free and plopped onto the floor. She shook her head and wiped her eyes, the big magnum still clutched in one hand.

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“Oh, God, a man was in here – ” Then she looked up, saw me, screamed again and pointed the gun at my head.

“No!” I screamed, ducking just as it went off, over my head and into the little stand of trees behind the house. I scrambled to the Buick and peeled out. Twice more I heard the gun’s *Caroom!* slam and echo into the night, mixed with the keening funk of her screams.

When I cruised past the house the following afternoon her car was gone and the front door stood wide open. Inside, dressers were torn apart, the closets in disarray. A trail of parachute-like smocks led to the bedroom and I walked on them back and forth. They were printed and embroidered with little girl things, teddy bears and Raggedy Anns and bluebirds, plantation waifs in sunbonnets, all feminine and soft.

I moved back in.

A few weeks after the mix-up with Miss Duke, I made the mistake of spilling my problems to an old lady down the street. She’d been bringing me jars of fresh homemade soup and chili ever since I’d come home, and she seemed very nice and concerned, so one day I went down to her house and said, “Can I talk to you? I’ve got to talk to someone, Mrs. Tropes.” She took me in, fed me cake and coffee and listened to me for an hour, then said, “I’m so sorry for you,” and sent me home with a pat on the arm. It wasn’t until then that my neighbors started staring at me when I drove up or down the street, going somewhere. God knows they had good reason to before that, what with the gunshots and screams that one night. But they never did until Mrs. Tropes told them my story. Only when she told them that I had said I was lonely did the real treatment begin. The grownups stared and no longer waved, and the kids got a kick out of calling me on the phone. It would ring in the middle of the night and when I answered some kid would be on the other end.

“Hello, is this Mr. Lonely?”

“Who?”

“Is this Mr. Lone-lee?”

“No this is not Mr. Lone-lee.”

“You must be lonely,” said the boy’s voice.

“You kids cut it out,” I said.

“Oh, please don’t be lonely.”

It was absurd. I hung up.

Mrs. Tropes told them everything. The phone rang one night about 12:30 and I answered it without speaking.

“Hey, mister, there’s a naked fat woman in your front yard and she has a gun.”

I was furious.

“You little shits leave me *alone*,” I shouted, and slammed the phone onto

the hook.

But I had to look. I crept to the window and peeked through the drapes – no naked fat woman with a gun. My fears weren't unreasonable. Things happen.

I went to the library and saw a group of Harley choppers outside the door, but didn't think anything of it. Inside, I was thumbing through a book when, glancing up, I saw the face of my wife peering at me from the other side of the shelf. She walked around and stood there staring at me. She wore a full set of tight, black motorcycle leathers. A pair of heavy, strapped, chrome-buckled boots came up to her knees.

"Hey, Conroy," she said. "You don't look so good." Then she smiled and leaned on the bookshelves. "How's the old homeplace?"

"Leave me alone," I said. "You're dead to me." I calmly replaced the book on the shelf and walked out.

On my way home the Tisdale Group came out of nowhere and roared past me on their Harleys. I saw a slim, black leather-clad arm flip a wave at me from a quivering pattern of red taillights that disappeared into the night like a spaceship.

Things happen.

Last night Sylvia and I were going at it, in the bedroom for once. But she lost her head, forgot where she was I guess. Her eyes were closed, and she kind of hummed, and I could see her eyes darting back and forth behind her pale bruised lids. The hum became a kind of murmuring, and it started to turn me on. But then something emptied my mind with a strange cold jolt and left everything quiet.

I lifted my head and looked at her, but she didn't notice right away. She was whispering something in kind of a chant.

"Kevin," she was saying over and over again, whispering and kind of moaning it, too. I couldn't believe it at first, and then I was sure.

I couldn't go on.

She went still and opened her eyes. "What's the matter?"

"What did you say?" I said.

"What? When?"

"Who's Kevin?" I said.

I could tell she felt awful about it.

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry, Conroy. I didn't mean it. I just spaced out. Oh, man."

I felt like an idiot for caring about it.

"It's all right," I said. "Not a big deal."

I turned to the wall, put my back to her.

"I'm really sorry, Conroy. Please don't be upset."

But I felt sick. "Just forget it," I said.

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It took me hours to go to sleep. Bad dreams kept me restless. They were all dreams in which I said the wrong things, did the wrong things, dreams in which I forgot the names of people I'd known for a long time.

Early this morning I got up and came out here with my lawn chair and my flask. An hour or so later I heard her voice behind me.

"Conroy."

"Yes," I said, not turning around.

"You didn't jump this time."

"I expected you this time."

"Well. Goodbye, then. I'm going."

"Goodbye, whoever you are." I heard her retreating footsteps in the grass.

I went back into my house, just to look around, really. I walked around the den for a minute, then into the kitchen, where I washed one dish. Then to the bedroom, where I found my bed neatly made up, the pillows fluffed. It was the first time I'd seen my bed made up since I don't know. Then I went into the bathroom, pressed my bare feet on the cool tiles, looked around. I noticed that 'Sylvia' had stolen all my shampoo and soap. I looked into the closet. Half my towels and washrags were gone. I thought for a moment then rushed back into the bedroom and looked at the neatly made up bed. Sure enough, my wife's old quilt was gone. I went through the kitchen and the living room. Something was missing from one of these rooms, I knew. But I still haven't figured out what. Maybe nothing, maybe it's my imagination. I just can't tell right now.

I called old Crews and asked him over for a drink tonight. I apologized for what happened down at the office.

It's cool, Conroy, is what Crews said.

I came back out here to my lawn chair and I've been sitting here all day, listening. I hear sounds. The wind moving through certain channels in the trees, rattling particular leaves, I can't tell which. Noises, little rustling sounds, behind me, in the shrubbery, in the grass. Birds call from far away to other birds, far away. So many different kinds of birds.

Nothing seems familiar anymore.