

## **My Husband and Your Story**

Dear Robert Olmstead,

You don't know me but as a writer I trust that you are accustomed to receiving letters from strangers so I have decided to work up the courage and write to you with a story you might be interested in hearing.

Several months ago for Christmas, I bought my husband, Rowan, a collection of best American short stories and also collections of Push cart and O. Henry winners. I am a librarian and I became one, I think, because like you (I think) I took my beginning from books, not life. I grew up shy and somewhat reclusive and well, giving books for presents is natural for me. Included in one of those collections was a story of yours and as I am sure you are aware of your own publications there is little need to go into details of the story I reference.

My husband, Rowan, was not a happy man. He was a professor who was a frustrated writer. Years ago when he was in graduate school in the Midwest he even one time had a story published in the graduate student literary journal. But the story title "Cat-O-Nine-Tales," was mistakenly changed to "Cat-O-Nine-Tails" by the copy editor, a fellow student in Restoration Drama. Rowan told me he was very angry about this change and thinks that something broke inside him. The copy editor he described as a big and desperate looking fellow from southern Indiana who was a recent veteran of the Vietnam War and one who wrote stories about "cutting the ears off gooks." When Rowan confronted him on the change, the student copy editor shrugged and said, "What do you want me to do about it?"

Yes, Rowan was a child of the sixties and yet his was not a modern mind. He was an absolute perfectionist and because of that lived in a psychological prison. (Though one time toward the end of his life he temporarily went out of his mind and shamelessly exposed himself to the Dean's wife. He'd taken to wearing a cassock and a black hat and at the time of his exposure was standing on the roof of the chapel annex

screaming and howling and wagging himself.) As it turned out, he was an undiagnosed bipolar and once he was diagnosed he was sustained and moderated by medication until that fateful day which gives me cause to write.

Perhaps I should add that I myself was born more than a decade later and was attracted to Rowan for what I mistook as a deep and brooding mind, when in fact it was simply dark and completely morose. He was like a father figure to me, very protective and nurturing, but he denied me my imaginative space. He was a troubled man and used much sarcastic humor to deflect his fears. He could be warm and kind, but most often his face was a pale and expressionless mask. I now know that I never should have married him, but at the time, I had my own demons. Very few people know this, but I entered the convent for two years between the ages of eighteen and twenty. I entered the convent because at sixteen I had a child and gave it (him? her?) up for adoption. It sent me into quite a tailspin. But I digress.

You see, I knew this story of yours was in the anthology because I read it in the Starbucks coffee shop at Barnes and Noble where I often buy books and I knew it would come to his attention and he would think that the story was about him and it would send him off the deep end. You see, I had come to hate him and every time he touched me it made my skin crawl. I even thought about telling him I was a lesbian such that I might escape him and actually lie down with women to convince him of the fact.

But I didn't have to. He read your story and it sent him into a deep depression. He thought he was the ridiculous lead character and I must say, however coincidental, the similarities are incredible. It seems he met you once at a conference and had a brief conversation with you that left quite an impression on him. He said something about writers and you responded rather bluntly. He said he thought you were drunk at the time. Rowan was absolutely convinced he was the character and he came to fear and despise you. He was in a state of constant paranoia. It was not hard to tell that he was encountering some form of mad obsession, and I was egging him on and took no pity on him. He was in no state to be reasoned with as his virility seemed at matter and patience and understanding were never really his more prominent virtues. The similarities really were uncanny and eventually, a few months later, he killed himself. The details of his suicide are neither important or all that creative. It was in the morning. He got me out of bed because he did not want to eat breakfast alone and while I was making the coffee

he went in the bedroom and shot himself.

Somewhere I read that no one is so unforgiving as the man that injures another. Well that was him. Rowan was not the friendliest man in the world when it came to others. He was remarkably unfriendly and so now I am a widow and I receive a lot of sympathy, baked goods and covered dishes. I feel as if I am experiencing a honeymoon and the honeymoon will subside and reality will eventually set in and there's still a long way to go, but I am thrilled. I feel a great burden has been lifted from my shoulders and it is you I have to thank and that's why I am writing, because I want to thank you and let you know that his blood is on both our hands.

Furthermore, I think someday I want to write. You have shown me the power of the pen. I know it isn't much but please accept this Mount Blanc pen in gratitude for all that you have done without even knowing you have done it. All great wisdom traditions speak of a great ordeal that must be mastered and I think this could be mine...

Dear Robert Olmstead,

You didn't even know it was me! I was the (rather attractive) woman with really long hair wearing black slacks and a black cowl neck sweater who asked you the question about women in your fiction two weeks ago at the writer's workshop in Montana. In particular about their hair and how it is like you have a hair thing for women. Then I went online and found the essay where you wrote about it. You quote the Bible, Corinthians 11:15: "If a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her."

You also said your favorite quote was from Ernest Renan's *Life of Christ (Vie de Jesus)*, "For thousands of years man was a fool, after having been for thousands of years an animal." I like that quote and also thought your comments on Joyce Carol Oates were especially incisive.

At first I did not recognize you. You look absolutely nothing like the photo on your book jackets. You have shaved off your beard and of course you are older—but in a good way. You don't seem to be so serious and distant as you appear in your photograph. You looked very classy in your charcoal gray suit, white shirt, red tie. Are you a Republican? Republicans wear red ties. Is that a new look for you? If so, it seems a very natural one.

Later that night at dinner I watched you eat. I like how when you eat it's like bear or big cat. Eating takes you over. You eat with your fingers. You glutch down your food. You lick your fingers and sigh

deeply. Then I was in the bar when you were there having drinks and talking the editor from Penguin about bird hunting. My father was an avid bird hunter so it was a joy to eavesdrop on that part of the conversation. I was with several other workshop attendees. We bought you and your editor friends several rounds of drinks. You were Johnny Walker Black and he was Stoli. Our elbows touched, just a glance and I about fainted. Maybe you remember. I was wearing black jeans, a gray silk blouse and a leather jacket. Maybe you noticed my hair. It's long now and quite transformative. Just joking!

I feel like I owe you so much for killing my husband and how can I ever repay you? And please forgive me, but diabetics should not drink so much. There, I have said it. Don't ask me how I know. I just do. As a librarian I have at hand an amazing array of research tools. For instance I have compiled a list of all the writers you have ever mentioned in interviews and essays and actually found a syllabus on the web for a course you once taught with a required reading list of twelve novels.

What I really (boldly) wanted to ask you about is the female orgasm. Do you have an opinion on it? It seems like you would. It's been a long time for me—since Rowan killed himself and actually a lot longer before that as I could not stand him touching me. Boy-howdy that came out of nowhere, but I am different now. I have almost lived exactly halfmy life and you can believe me when I say that the second is going to be a lot different from the first half. The writing sessions I attended (not yours; I'd be too self-conscious) at the conference were like a cool breeze on a hot day.

I am not sure what I was looking for when I first wrote you, but have decided I am relieved you've not written back. I just want you to listen to my letters. You seem like a good listener and please accept this box of Cuesta Reys (I still have the cigar band you left on the bar) for being a good listener...

Dear Robert,

In Virginia you were asked about that one piece of advice that you would have for beginning writers and you said, "I try and think about what was necessary for me and so I start thinking about courage and courage and courage."

I thought that was very simple and profound. You also responded to a question by telling how you receive strange mail. You said it to be funny. I understand that—being funny. I just hope you were not

thinking about my letters when you made that statement. I would die if you thought I was somehow dangerous to you or that in your mind I was something comical. Please don't ever think that I am comical, or a stalker, or anything like that because I assure you that I am not and would absolutely melt if I ever thought that was your opinion.

Why I am writing is that due to your inspiration, due to the year that has passed and the remarkable blossoming that I feel within myself, I have decided to become a writer (there, I've said it!!) and was wondering if you could advise me as to the best way to proceed. I have the money from Rowan's several life insurance policies and so financing such an endeavor is not a problem. Funny. Rowan had serious questions about the concepts of private property, especially intellectual property. When he met you at the conference he said something critical about extending copyright law on behalf of writers. Apparently you said, "property is property and ownership is ownership and the day the rich give up their property, you'll give up yours." Rowan Xeroxed with impunity after his encounter with you! He compiled course books with utter disregard for copyright law and was in danger toward the "end" of embroiling the university in a very nasty lawsuit. As one of the librarians at the university you can well imagine the ugliness and conflicts created for me. It was almost worse than his antics on the roof of the chapel annex. I had trouble understanding that it wasn't personally directed at me whose training is in the library sciences.

I was going to ask you this question at the writers conference, but was too embarrassed after you made the fan mail comment. I hope you have received and are enjoying the flowers I sent. A peace offering I guess. And also to allay concerns you might have, you should know that I have taken a lover. He is younger than me. He was a baseball player, a pitcher, and was a professional prospect until he "blew out his shoulder." He has returned to the university to do graduate work—urban planning. We are so different it is exhilarating. I sent flowers because you seem like a man who would enjoy flowers...

Dear Robert,

I feel horrible. At the writer's conference in Baltimore, I was the mystery woman, who in a sudden passion, you slept with. Me. I was she. It was my hair, wasn't it? I changed the color to be as close to white as I could. It is now ultra light blond and okay, I admit it, I feel absolutely fantastic. You never had a chance. You poor thing.

I do not know how to ask you to forgive my deception. You see, in Montana when you were talking to the editor from Penguin hat night in the bar, I could not help but overhear how sad your life has been these last two years.

However frustrated you may have been by your “dysfunction” during the early hours of our adventure, you rallied wonderfully and made this girl very happy and contented indeed. Whoever taught you how to satisfy a woman should receive a prize. I didn’t think I could have so many orgasms and still remain conscious. It’s funny, but I was so embarrassed that I had a run in my stocking and my brassiere and panty set did not match but you were an absolute gentleman. I told you lies (name, occupation, place of residence, etc.), but the lies I told you were white lies just like my hair. Neither of us was hurting anybody.

The next morning, slipping the needle into your skin was a holy act for me. If you were mine, I’d have you on the treadmill every morning and in yoga class three nights a week. Exercise and diet can have extraordinary results. You did sleep with contentment and for that I am grateful.

But alas, this is how I repay you for all that you have done for me? Suddenly I am mortified. How will I ever be able to face you again. How can you every forgive me for being such a coward? Please accept these two cardigan sweaters. They are Italian and very soft. I imagine you are wearing them casually with nice slacks or under your suits. I promise I’ll never write again...

Dear Robert,

I know that I promised you I’d never write again but I cannot help it. I think this is the hardest letter I have ever written, harder by far than the first letter I ever wrote to you and if you asked me eighteen months ago where my life would be today, well, who could ever imagine. So—I will just tell you because I think you will want to know and I promise I will never write again and this time I really mean it.

You should know that soon after the conference in Blatimore I experienced a false pregnancy. *Some powers are powerless. Some of permanence are always temporary.* Words you wrote. I think those were the most thrilling days of my life...

Dear Robert,

So—it's been awhile. Two years since I last wrote and I know I promised I'd never write you again, but how could I ever keep such a promise when there is such good news for me. I am soon to graduate with my MFA in Creative Writing and have an agent and a book contract and everything is so amazing. Like for instance, I have finally learned to smoke! Anyway, I thought I should tell you before you see my name in print and read my story in *People Magazine* and *Vanity Fair* and who knows where. My agent says they are all going to be doing my story. Rowan's death seems of great interest to them. My agent says, "all the angles are there so they won't have to think." My publisher talks about my "coming-out party" and my agent calls it my "debut" and Lew, my thesis advisor, tells me I won't be "cherry" anymore, though of course he better knows that anyone that I'm not. Hee. Hee.

Anyway, I want to make it abundantly clear that the book is not about you and while you may be tempted to conclude such because of several similarities between yourself and the writer character in the novel these are merely coincidental similarities.

Also—I doubt the writer character will receive that much attention as the book is about a woman who dreams nightly of Bill Clinton (apparently a lot of them do) and so he'll be the one they jump on.

Excerpt:

*"You dreamt about Bill Clinton last night?" Phelan said.*

*"Yes. I had my Clinton dream," Gloria replied.*

*"You did?"*

*"Yes."*

*"How was it?"*

*"It was pretty good. He gave me a tour of the White House and we passed Hillary in the hall. She was quite nice."*

*Phelan wondered who Hillary might be dreaming about while Gloria and all these other women were dreaming about her husband. He felt sorry for her. As if the poor woman didn't have enough to put up with trying to write a health care plan for America to make everybody happy.*

Phelan is her writer husband. She is kind of a free spirit. She has a tattoo. She doesn't own very many articles of clothing with sleeves. She likes to stand in the rain with her mouth open and has a habit of licking watch faces and twice, on impulse, when silverware falls into the garbage disposal, she has the disconcerting tendency to reach for it without first cutting off the switch. Who is real is her father. This character

is a loving homage to my own father. What really interested my father was the relationship between mathematics and the real world that we live in. He was inventing a new slide rule when he had his coronary. I loved him immensely and he is in there. She (Gloria) also dream about David Koresh and how he really was Jesus.

I love being a writer and I do understand how hard it is and what burden and responsibility comes from such. How much courage it takes. Please accept this signed galley and if you are so inclined I would be forever grateful for a blurb my publisher might use on the book. Your endorsement means more to me than I can say.