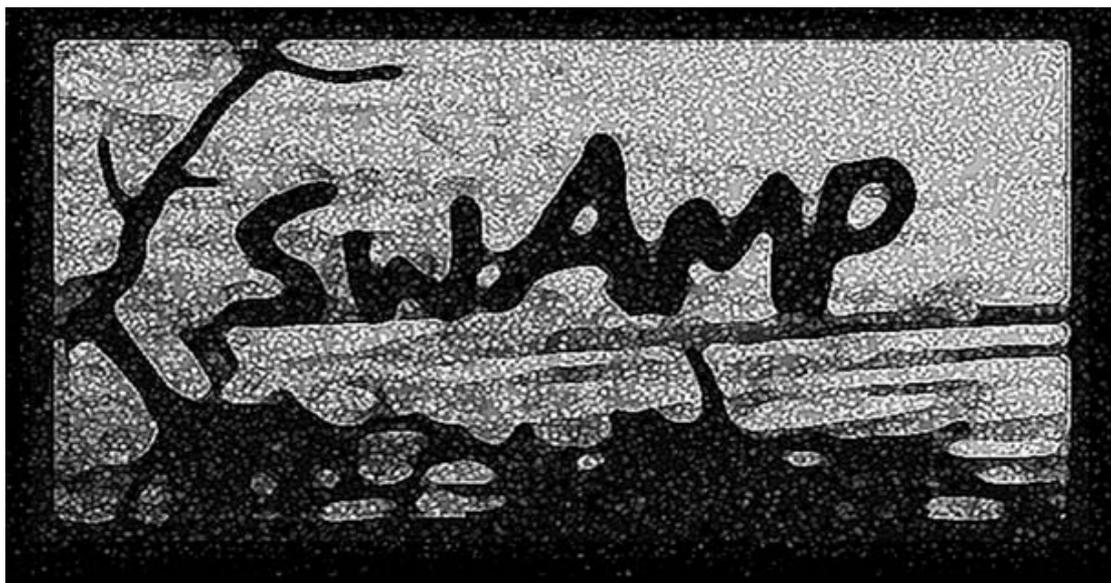


Story originally posted at: http://www.swampwriting.com/?page_id=147



Issue #8

Wrinkle

Lauren Rosewarne (University of Melbourne, Australia)

Date 5.

“Hey,” he says, a clammy hand motioning over my bare back. “Now don’t take this the wrong way, yeah?”

Pelvic clench. There’s a sketchy yen to sit up, to eyeball him, to ask him whether he really wants to finish that sentence *and* stay in my bed. Quickly following however, is the thought that unless the lamp goes off I’m staying *thoroughly* horizontal.

I press my chin into the pillow. It’s not as though I’ve ever set the bar that high for post-coital festivities. So long as there’s no quick escape to wash me away with scorching water and soap, so long as they don’t wait until *after* withdrawal to divulge details of some dischargey disease, then I’m okay with whatever transpires. Sleep, silence, small talk, skin stroking, I’m not fussed. *What* might I take the wrong way?

A week prior. An unmemorable city bar, Bruce Springsteen’s crappy “Secret Garden” on in the background. We were talking about women’s magazines. Confidently he’d claimed that women are much harsher judges than men; that *women* are the ones obsessed with skinniness, with size. Briefly, as we sunk down on a velour bench, our thighs just touching, it occurred to me that he might have been paying me a compliment. Longer lasting however, was the feeling that he was trying to convince himself. And what, *after* sex is the best time to tell me that my chubbiness isn’t all that okay? That in fact he’s quite repulsed? Yeah, I’ll take that the wrong way.

I arch my neck to look at the clock. 2:27am. This is not a 2:27am conversation. Not naked. Not all jiggy and fleshy and so fucking exposed. All the worst fights happen after midnight. Tempting fate; messing with circadian rhythms. There's a nice REM song about circadian rhythms. 2:27am isn't fight time. 2:27am is niggly, bullshit, just-about-anything-will-cause-fireworks time. 2:27am is *spooning* time. Drowsy kissing time. And my apartment is too small for confrontation. The first sex we had occurred at the seemly time of 10:00pm. A week or so ago. 10:00pm is conducive to fighting. 2:27am and it'll end in tears, raised voices, a door slam and sobbing.

He's been fucking someone else, hasn't he? Date 5. What kind of loyalties could I have expected? I've been here before, of course; had this very same conversation before. The same bed. Lain in exactly the same position, clenched in exactly the same places. I know exactly how hard to bite down to thwart the tears. Could even force a shoulder twitch to convey nonchalance should I need to. I probably *can't* say, "That's fine, don't worry about it" – words will prompt a collapse – but I could keep still enough. If I had to.

Five dates. Myself, I do loyalty quite well. Not because I think it's the right *thing* to do, not because I fall in love quickly and want to immerse fully, cocoon. *Au contraire*. I just can't hold more than one idea, more than one *man*, in my head. Jealousy must be the proverbial fly in the ointment for polyamorists. For me, it'd be the difficulty of dispersing energies. I can't think about more than one man. I can't have conversations in my head with more than one man. I can't pine for more than one man and *I can't fucking hold it together* for more than one man.

Him fucking someone else. The *idea* is horrible enough but any *declaration*, any fucking *confession* and there'll be bile. Vomit. I don't want to do this. I don't want to hear this. I don't want him talking about someone else while in my fucking bed after we've just fucked. Not at 2:27am. No. I'm not doing this again. And I don't want to have to throw him out while I'm fucking naked. And I don't want to have to watch him dress. And I don't want to watch him tie up his bloody shoes and I don't want to know if I'm expected to say goodbye. And I don't want to cry, I don't want to cry, I don't want to cry. And I don't want to offer him a drink.

Chlamydia. Just let him tell me he has chlamydia. Left untreated and I might become infertile which is far less invasive than a hysterectomy. I'd rather chlamydia than betrayal. I'd rather do outrage, impertinence, come-here-baby-I-forgive-you than betrayal. Disease I'm okay with, devastation no. I don't recover well. Turn the fucking lamp off!

"Should I be worried?" I manage, rolling onto my side, to face him. His eyebrows nudge together. "What do you think I'm going to say?" Laughter in his voice. He bites my shoulder gently.

I lean forward, kissing his freckled bicep. "I couldn't hasten a guess."

"Blow jobs," he says seriously, ruffling my hair. "You've got a gift."

"Huh?" The word sounds wrenched; gag-like.

He sighs through his teeth. “I *knew* you’d fucking take it the –”

“It’s just an odd thing to say,” I say, smoothing a thumb over his cheek. “That’s all.” Smoothing, smoothing. “That’s all.”

“So you’re *not* offended?” Pause. “Because I swear to God, half the time I –”

“I’m not offended.” I kissed his freckles again, force a taut laugh. “It’s fine, babe.” Real laughter. “Feminists fought long and hard for such recognition.”

*

Date 9.

“No. Stop. This isn’t...” His words trail and he’s off the bed. He’s off the bed, out of the bedroom, re-robing near the couch. All in *complete fury*. I watch him, squinting, captivated.

“It wasn’t *fun*,” he sneers, using my name. “Sex is supposed to be fun. God, you’re so fucking *thinking*, so *talking* all the time. It’s. So. Fucking. Tiring.”

Initially, because after all I’m always seduced by the minutiae, I couldn’t work out how he even got into the lounge room. How he’d managed to leap from my bed, walk through the doorway – right in front of me, presumably *still* sporting an erection – and appear in the lounge room without me noticing. How did I not see any of that?

“The talking, the constant talking. Why can’t there just be moaning? Why isn’t that enough for you? Why can’t –” He scratches his hands through his hair. Back and forth, back and forth maniacally. Near snarling. “For fuck’s sake. What, for an hour you can’t just turn off?”

I remain still on my bed, on my stomach, watching him throw back mug after mug of water. Presumably trips to the kitchen punctuate each chug but I just see him standing still, leaning against the glass door. Looking out through the glass and gulping like a mad man.

“I can’t do this.” He uses my name again. “This mad, sado-masochistic... Why can’t you have some fucking *trust* in yourself? Trust that you’re okay, that you’re enough, without all the bullshit?”

My timing has always been relatively horrible for this kind of thing. Part of me knows that some kind of venting needs to happen, that I just need to let the guy do his thing. Drink his water. Of course, there’s *knowing* what I should do and then there’s the curiosity. The management. The all-encompassing need to assuage, to fix.

“Come and sit down, hon.” I pat the bed for affect, smoothing the sheet, charading conciliation. Who *stops* sex to fight? Who gets *that* angry? Who drinks *that* much water?

Who wouldn’t - at the very fucking least - wait for the orgasm?

“The analysis, the constant fucking analysis. The head games. Do men usually like this?” Using my name again. “Do men usually get off on this?”

“*Men*. In the plural? What? Because you think there have been so many?”

“I need time to calm down.” Using my name again. More water. More scalp scratching.

“*Fuck!*” A weird, full-body jerking motion. “I can’t believe it got this bad this quickly.”

This bad this quickly. I lay still, staring at him, pressing my chin into my pillow. Wondering why he chose a mug and not a glass.

*

Date 12.

“Are you okay?” he asks, looking across the table at me. There’s no concern on his face. I don’t think I’ve actually ever seen him do concerned. I repel it, evidently; my exuding composure and all. In fact, his expression is more about gauging hostility. Assessing whether he’ll end up scalded. Charred.

“No,” I say, staring into his bowl of steaming water. “But then, I’d more concerned if I felt nothing.” He shakes soy sauce into his broth. Yes, because one should always carefully season one’s food during such a conversation. Priorities. Because God forbid the conversation might be more important than the food. I *hate* this fucking wonton place. I hate wontons, but I fucking hate the place so much more. Its only saving grace is that I can happily strike the establishment from my list. After all, I only miss the decent places. First dates inevitably involve that, “So do you know of any good places nearby?” question. And of course I do; I know of *every* good place. And I’ve been to every good place and I’ve suffered through a scene just like this in each one of them. And now all of those good places are on a list I call the Banned List. Songs that never get played, perfumes never sprayed, cafes never visited. *Dumpling places never fucking returned to*. Fucking city. Fucking greasy, greasy disgusting dumplings.

“I should never have let you take my hand,” I say softly, stabbing a chopstick into my rice. Date three, maybe four. We were walking back to my place after dinner. Side by side, a chillily lovely night. I looked ahead towards the Catholic church on the corner, the one where my grandma is during every family crisis. Lighting candles. And I did that Freudian magical thinking bullshit that renders me textbook neurotic, and I let myself believe that if he took my hand before we reached the church, if he threaded his fingers through mine, if he *kept* my fingers linked with his, then we’d work. That we’d be okay. And he did. He took my hand, he held it, and we walked home to my place exactly like that. Why did he fucking give me *that*? Just to take it away?

“Took your hand where?” He swallows a mouthful of soup. “Fuck,” he takes a chug of Coke.

“It’s like... you talk in these riddles sometimes.” Using my name. “Why you can’t just be yourself?”

“*Myself?*” I whisper, feeling everything wrinkle.

“Just eat something.” He pushes my rice closer to me. In case I hadn’t noticed the glutinous mess cooling in front of me.

“I’m going to go,” I say, pushing my full plate back towards him.

“Eat something. Come on.”

I’m guessing there’s a point where it’s possible to leave with dignity. A window period where standing up, maybe saying “fuck you”, maybe just smiling and walking out is possible. I’ve never noticed that window.

“Is that it then?” I ask, motioning the ring pull back and forth on my can until I work it loose.

His eyes are on me. “We’ll talk, we’ll talk.” Watery soup trickles down the side of his mouth.

“Right now we’re eating.”

We’re not eating. “I like psychological cleanliness,” I say. Using his name.

“Mmm.” He smirks. “Sure you do.” Laughter in his voice.

I fiddle with the ring pull.

“You lined up the Starburst.” I say and rest my head on my hand. “You lined them up. Put all the red ones together, all the yellow.” He did this in my apartment. A week or so ago. I stood behind him, watching. Letting myself be thoroughly charmed. Little stacks of colour-sorted lollies on the edge of my couch. Leaving me fifty percent of the packet we’d bought on the way home.

“Because *now* is the right time to mock me,” he says.

I lean back in the greasy booth. Watch him eye me suspiciously. He smirks, shakes his head and pulls my plate of rice towards him.

Lauren Rosewarne writes and researches in gender, sexuality and politics and is currently enrolled in a Master of Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing at the University of Melbourne.