

No Way Out

by

Tara Waters Lumpkin

Published in *Buffalo Spree*, Volume 22, Number 4, Buffalo, NY,
Winter 1988

A cool breeze wrapped itself like a tongue around my legs. It was spring and the tree frogs were singing down by the pond. A patch of mist lay over the water. It was the first time in weeks I had not been depressed, as if before I had walked around in a sack of fluid that cushioned me from the world. City living did that to me—cut me off from the external world—but this morning the outdoors was real. I watched pond mist slowly evaporate and thought with pleasure about the affair I was having with Malcolm.

Pre-planned, I had first considered the affair when driving the seven hundred and fifty miles between Chicago and Baltimore. I had imagined a tangle of limbs, hair studded with bits of brown leaf, dirt dusting naked bodies. I had imagined myself moist with dew lying in a field in the early morning. My desire grew until the image became a spiritual quest. And I chose Malcolm to fulfill that quest. I chose Malcolm to be my lover. Trucks swept past me on the highway doing eighty miles an hour. My mind raced even faster. Yes, Malcolm was the man who could bring me pleasure. Malcolm could free me from that prison called marriage.

Malcolm seemed to understand right away when I called him and asked him to meet me in a hollow in the woods behind the old Johnson place. Perhaps there was something to E.S.P. and he had been thinking about me as I thought of him, but probably not. The truth was that he agreed to meet me, because he was the sort of man who enjoyed meeting women in the woods—a man who lusted after women. It was well known that he ran around on his wife. In plain English, he couldn't help loving women. Loving them for no reason other than that they were women. He had never loved a particular woman, except his wife—the mother of his children. I wanted that sort of man. I was sick to death of Giles, my husband, who hated women in general. He had looked for years for a woman he could stand, and had picked me. A big mistake, he now realized, which was why he methodically set about making my life miserable. He wanted me to run out on him, which would prove to himself and (he believed) the world that women were bitches, every one of them. I refused to leave,

not because I didn't want to (I did), but because I had no way of supporting myself. I was a painter. Not a painter of houses, but an artist. Truth was, I was an "undiscovered" painter, which meant that nobody was buying my work, which meant that I was broke. It's hard to walk out the door when you only have enough money to last a week. You start to figure that life on the street would be worse than living with someone you don't love, even if he is emotionally abusive. So I chose to stay. It seemed the lesser of two evils. If I wanted to have any fun, I would have to have an affair. Malcolm was quite sweet about it. He had agreed to meet me at the old Johnson place after I'd explained what I wanted—love with no strings attached. When I drove in, he ran over and kissed me hard. It was like eating oranges in a desert; the kisses were thirst quenching.

The weeks of our affair were separate from my real life. They were unconnected with spouses, money, and kitchen squalor. I was happy when I ran errands, happy helping my mother clean house, happy drinking Irish Breakfast tea with cream, happy in my dreams, happy when I awoke. And best of all, I didn't try to be happy (chin up and all that), I just couldn't help it. I framed one of my paintings even though Giles didn't like me "wasting" money on my artwork and gave it to Mother. I watched French films on the VCR at night. I enjoyed the gritty taste of dust as it flew in the air while I dusted. The dust smelled sharp and earthy, unlike Chicago dust which smelled of ashes and chemicals. I savored bubble baths in my mother's giant sunken tub, even bivouacked in a tent during thunder storms at night.

Malcolm, how to describe Malcolm. He was very handsome. A woman wants a handsome man for an affair, just as a man wants a pretty woman. He was thirty five, trim, fit with blue, blue eyes, but—most importantly—he was a painter, an artist, an "undiscovered" artist like myself. That was the real thing which brought us together: our mutual love for something else.

"I must paint you someday," he said to me, though we both knew that he couldn't, that his wife would figure out we were seeing each other. He said it anyway.

"And I must paint you," I said, though I couldn't either.

He exercised horses every morning at the race track, arriving there at six. I would be there with him too, grooming the horses he was to ride, tacking them up. He would hand me the last horse he'd ridden, blowing and flecked with sweat, and then kiss me before he got on the next one. His wife wasn't horsy, so our behavior was relatively safe. And once, we dared fate...

"Come here," he said, leading me to the hay loft.

"What if we get caught?"

"We can't. Someone up there looks after love like ours."

"Not love," I said. How I had grown to hate that overused word. "Love" and "cherish"—as if either could exist in a marriage. I had long ago discovered that marriage and love were mutually exclusive. And I had recast the word "love", sworn that if I ever felt that emotion again, I would not belittle it by calling it "love". No, I would call it what it was: "passion". What I felt for Malcolm was passion. What I (and the rest

of the world) lived for was passion. "Not love," I repeated, "this feeling is greater than love, it is passion. I would die for you."

Malcolm pushed me down among the hay bales; the dried grass scratched my back. He pinned my arms back above my head and kissed me and made love to me. This was what I lived for, this, not the cold, empty way my husband made love to me, slipping me in between brought home office work and sleep. To Giles I was no more important than the two cookies and glass of milk he allowed himself each night before retiring. I assure you, it is depressing to be on par with a chocolate chip cookie.

"Do you like chocolate chip cookies?" I asked Malcolm when we were through making love, lying in the hay holding hands.

"No," he answered, "I don't like anything sweet. Anyway if I did, I couldn't eat it. I have to keep my weight down to ride."

My mother had told me over and over when I was in my early twenties, "Never marry a man who likes his chow too much. He'll be lousy in bed."

Now I understood.

But like all good things, the affair with Malcolm came to an end; Giles came back East for a week. Not only that, my father called asking if we could come to dinner. Already I was feeling numb, like a punching bag whose stuffing is falling out. My father had a new wife. Henrietta was her name. She was none too bright, but she did as she was bidden and she was a great cook. My mother's lack of enthusiasm for cooking was one of the reasons my father had given for divorcing her. The other one was her drinking. And the last one was that she fooled around. Of course, he had fooled around too, but a man was expected to do that; a woman wasn't. The old double standard.

"Okay, Dad," I said, "we'll come to dinner." After all, I thought, how could things get any worse than they already were? Maybe seeing Henrietta in action might give me an idea how to handle Giles.

"Are you sure you're ready to meet her?" Giles asked, referring to Henrietta. "You sure you don't want to wait another six months?"

"No Giles, I'll try to be real brave and deal with it now," I answered sarcastically.

Giles had some strange notion that I was traumatized by my father having left my mother and that it was this that made our marriage difficult. He was not much of a psychologist, but then again he'd never read anything except newspapers and business reports. The fact of the matter was that he figured I should change into his idea of what a wife should be—sweet, good cook, never complaining, holding down a good job, not intellectual. He was sure that as soon as I came to my senses and got over my "father complex", I'd improve. When I tried to explain to him that his insistence on being "Master of the House" was ruining our marriage, he threatened to kick me out. Later desiring sex, he forgave me for "speaking out against him."

"I know how you're upset about your father. It's that father complex of yours that makes you disagree with me," he said.

I gritted my teeth, fantasized about another man, and got the sex over with. It was put out or be thrown out.

Okay, I was a hopeless romantic, but I wasn't a fool. I knew that if a man ran out on a woman, it was not considered any big deal, but that if a woman ran out on a man, she was socially ostracized. And that is exactly what had happened when Father left Mother. Nobody cared. Dad's friends said Henrietta was a nice girl, so attractive, which considering she was twenty five years old (exactly my age) I assumed she should be. Even my mother's friends forgave him. It was a difficult time for Mum, but Dad did, at least, leave her the house. So now my father wanted me, his eldest daughter, to excuse his behavior too. I agreed to come to dinner and meet Henrietta, hoping that in the end I (like everyone else) would find her pleasant.

What did anything really matter anyway? Giles was back, and I couldn't see Malcolm. And anyway I didn't want to marry Malcolm, I just wanted to keep on with the affair. It wasn't Malcolm that I really loved but the sense of reckless abandon I experienced with him. I took to watching Giles as if he were an animal in the zoo. In the mornings as I sipped coffee and looked out over the marsh pond, a mixture of sadness and desire would wash over me. Ducks and geese glided onto the pond's still waters sending out ripples. I tried to remember feeling lust for Giles, but couldn't. To feel lust for a man there must be expectations. I had no expectations for Giles. He didn't like them. He was a rigid tyrant eating his breakfast eggs. Tough. Businesslike. Emotionless. A man like my father. The sort who wanted to live life his way and his way only. A very particular way. Someday Giles would abandon me (as he did over and over in my dreams). I dreamt that he left me on the edge of a black paved road and continued on alone, a suitcase full of money in his hand. I tried one morning to be romantic toward him. It was more an experiment than anything else. I just wanted to see if the situation could change. I asked him if he wanted to sleep outside down by the pond with me in a tent that night. I couldn't imagine anything more romantic.

"No," he answered, "but if you really want me to, I will. It seems childish to me"
"Never mind," I replied.

That was the last time I tried to get him to do anything frivolous.

The dinner with Henrietta and Dad was unremarkable. She was, as he had told me, a very good cook. She wasn't too tall, nor too short, nor too thin, nor too fat. In essence, she was bland—a nice, attractive woman, and deadly boring. Henrietta filled the role my father had created for her perfectly: she went duck hunting with him, cooked him gourmet meals which she served with a flourish, appreciated fine wines, and worked in the same hospital as him as an assistant researcher. How long could she keep it up I wondered? There was no electric current between them, but Dad was very content. Did Henrietta realize how much she resembled Dad's mother, Grandma? In the old days Grandma cooked big spaghetti dinners each Sunday, busying herself in the kitchen during cocktails, serving, and cleaning up after the meal. I shuddered to see the performance reenacted. I wondered if people didn't marry familiar behavior patterns rather than real people. Giles, of course, thought she

was splendid. He oohed and aahed over the food, making not so subtle hints that it would be wonderful if I would cook for him like this. Later I had to point out to him that Henrietta had good reason to cook and serve—after all, she was my age and my father was a successful doctor. That placed about one million dollars in her sweet little hands, decent compensation for a little work over the stove.

"If and when", I said to Giles, after his last comment about how delicious the dessert was, "you stop being cheap and give me a little money, rather than putting it all in the bank or spending it on yourself, I'll cook you whatever you want."

"You see the sort of things she says to me?" Giles asked, turning to my father.

Dad was clearly upset. My behavior seemed rude. Leaving one's wife was just one of those things. Showing discontent with your husband was high treason.

Henrietta bowed her head. The smell of curry and spice still clung to the dining room. I could see she was a little afraid, knowing my father had invited me over to sit in judgment on her, but his reprimand reassured her. Her back relaxed. She raised her head.

I didn't care. Try as I did to hate her, I couldn't feel anything toward her. My disgust was only for the men. I saw my father for what he was—a man who wanted a smooth life. The image I had been taught and cherished since childhood, the image of man as warrior, protector, and fighter vanished. All hype. My father was just a man trying to get along, and my husband was no better. I had more courage in my little pinky than they had together. Both of them plugged up the holes in their lives with whatever was available. I had been available. Mother had been available, and now Henrietta was available. We were as replaceable as rolls of toilet paper. I wanted to shout to Giles: "Look, look I'm alive. I sing. I flirt with death. I have many lovers. I live to love." He would have condemned that sort of carrying on.

When dinner was finished, Henrietta and I cleared the table, like good little wives, while the men drank cognac. I rinsed plates and wine glasses and put them in the dishwasher. Father and Giles leaned back in their chairs and basked in their own warm light, that light reserved for those who are served. What puffed up toads! I thought. The china was smooth and hard against the pads of my fingers. I held each plate beneath a steady stream of warm water. Then deliberately (I couldn't help it) I let a plate slip from my hands. It smashed into a million little pieces on the linoleum floor. The shards were like tea leaves in a tea cup. I read my future there, looked up and caught Henrietta's eyes. Our eyes flashed understanding smiles. Ironically, we realized there was no point in being enemies. The truth was that we were and would forever be irrevocably stuck.

—The End—