

Unwound

“It isn’t that strange, once you deconstruct the scene. I mean, it’s not like being around a bunch of pre-teen girls turns me on or anything.” Lara had grown tired of explaining herself to each new boyfriend when, in the course of their relationship, talk eventually turned from a mutual disdain for farm raised salmon to the sharing of each other’s sexual fantasies.

She preferred to keep her fantasies to herself. Wasn’t that the point, letting one’s mind wander without censure no matter who, or what, turned up?

“I don’t want to get involved in some Chris Hanson *Dateline*-type thing, you know, where they set up a sting to catch guys who want to have sex with girls.”

Her newest boyfriend, Thaddeus, tried to steer Lara from her summer camp story just like every other past boyfriend. It’s because men never listen the way women want them to listen to each word that forms each sentence that, in turn, forms the push and pull of romantic unions. What Lara wanted from Thaddeus was the same thing she had wanted from Paul before him and Rudy before that. Lara longed for someone to hear what wasn’t being said, and to know that what women aren’t saying is all that really matters.

She said, “I never once mentioned underage sex.”

Thaddeus prematurely checked the Belgian waffle maker. The new couple’s breakfast stuck, undercooked, to the top iron. “But you just told me whenever you touch yourself, you imagine summer camp when you were twelve?”

Lara sighed. She picked the stuck waffle off the top griddle with a fork. The dense sponge fell onto the counter in four small triangles. “I guess with a name like Thaddeus, I thought you’d understand. I thought you’d be, you know, different.”

“You’re right, you’re right,” her boyfriend of three months said. He stirred sour cream and powdered sugar to make waffle topping. “Try me again. I will be open minded this time, I swear.”

Normally Lara would not try again. With the other men, who she met through what was starting to feel like a random cattle call of eligible men and women stampeding each other’s height preferences all over online dating sites, Lara gave up after the fifth date. It was always around this time her suitor would show up at her front door with a music box that played “Lara’s Theme” from *Dr. Zhivago*, complete with a glowing, near euphoric realization that Lara was *the* Lara from the story, a modern day Julie Christie in the flesh, though Real Lara, with her unspectacular eyes and split ends, looked nothing like Movie Lara.

If I looked like Julie Christie I wouldn’t have to Internet date in the first place, she thought as she stacked each new music box next to the previous music box.

Most of the music boxes, eight at last count, came from eBay. In what looked like a surreal installation piece in a twee gallery, the boxes sat next to one another ready to play the tinny-sounding refrain, “Somewhere my love, there will be green and gold.” Made in Japan in the early 70’s, these boxes comprised a round plastic base of faux wood topped with a baby squirrel who sat on a swing set, swinging in time to the music as his squirrel mother kept watch from a porcelain tree.

Thaddeus had not given her a music box. He did not want her to be Julie Christie as Lara, but Real Lara. Lara who needed to trim her hair. Lara who worked part-time coordinating poets to read and sign books once a month at the public library. Lara who touched herself, late at night after the rest of the cul-de-sac went to bed, to thoughts of summer camp.

Not thoughts of other girls in her bunk, the Chipmunks cabin of four girls waiting at the edge of puberty. Lara did not masturbate to thoughts of vanilla cupcake-scented drugstore roll-on perfume, or even Marie-Marie, the girl so beautiful, so blonde and inviting, as a baby her parents named her twice.

It was the memory of the black ribbon that, without fail, always brought her body cascading over waterfalls of pleasure.

Her summer camp cabin of Chipmunks joined forces the first week of camp with the Spotted Owls next door. Known among campers as the “advanced girls,” the Owls, twelve going on twenty, already knew how to apply eyeliner. They spoke in a secret girl language that revolved around tampons and the Two Coreys and whether or not, when they got home, it was time to pack away the Little Ponies and spend their extra pony allowance money on *Tiger Beat*. The magazine had crowned Phyllis, the oldest Owl at twelve-and-a-half, a finalist the month before in the “Color in Simon LeBon’s Hair” contest.

“It’s because I used nail polish instead of crayons on the picture they printed,” she bragged through a purple mouth stuffed with grape Hubba Bubba. “The paper still reeked when I tore it out of the magazine and sent it in, even though I waited until the polish dried.”

One of Phyllis’ cousins, twice-removed, took a job as Junior Camp Counselor half-way through the summer season. This fact turned Phyllis from the lead Owl to the lead Everything. This meant she could now request after-hours ghost stories. Only other Owls, and two of the Chipmunks, Lara and of course Marie-Marie, received invites through a complicated series of hand gestures culminating in a to-the-death game of cat’s cradle with two of Phyllis’ favorite pink hair ribbons.

The night Phyllis' cousin showed up with her boyfriend, all acid washed jean shorts and moussed hair, even in the woods, Lara knew something in her life was going to change. As a twelve-year-old she assumed her life would change for the better, the direct opposite of what change now signifies, forty years old and burning through every online dating profile in her county and the next county over.

Phyllis' cousin's boyfriend, Rob, asked her cousin, Cynthia, to stand near the small fire lit just for them after lights-out for the other campers, the ones who wrote too many letters home and toasted each side of their marshmallows, prostrate on hand-whittled sticks, until a uniform beige blushed the entire warm and sticky treat. The Owls burnt every marshmallow until its remains fell into any fire they stood near, too much gossip and too much laughter canceling out the ability to even accomplish the simple task of rotating a stick in one hand. *They will all be bad mothers*, Lara thought as, at the campfire with Rob and Cynthia, she fought against her obedient nature, her inner clock on alert that something, an object even as innocuous and self-contained as a marshmallow, needed tending.

From the shadows just past the campfire Cynthia appeared in her regular camp uniform of T-shirt and knee-length shorts, but that night Lara felt a cosmic shift in her perception of the world.

Cynthia wore a black satin ribbon tied around her neck.

The image shook Lara, the ribbon giving the impression in the shadows that Cynthia's head and white blonde hair floated above her body. The other Chipmunks gasped. Lara refused to fall for the optical illusion, but moved to stand closer to Phyllis and her charred marshmallow.

Rob then told the story of a teenage girl, just like Cynthia, who always wore a ribbon around her neck. Always satin black. As Rob spoke he pointed to Cynthia's neck. She curtsied,

and Lara remembered how much Cynthia looked like a member of a royal court. In the story the girl met the boy of her dreams. On their wedding night, which Lara couldn't really comprehend the gravity of since she had never even kissed Jason, the one boy in Health class who didn't laugh when the teacher showed the film about the sperm and the egg, the new husband asked his bride to remove her ribbon.

"But I can never remove this ribbon," Cynthia answered when Rob paused in the story.

"Why so ever not, my love?" Rob asked.

Lara loved how he talked so old-fashioned.

"Because if I remove my ribbon, my head will fall off."

Rob said the boy in the story became obsessed with slipping the ribbon off his wife's soft neck, so much so that at night he practiced slipping a ribbon, identical in both color and width, off one of the round boxes of instant oatmeal the kept in the pantry while his wife slept.

This revelation caused a collective resonance to fan out among the campers with whispered observations like, "They wake up every morning and have breakfast together. You know what that means."

"No!"

"Yes!"

"No!"

"It means every night they fall asleep together. And if her husband is so concerned with removing the ribbon, that means he's already removed everything else!"

"Like when she sleeps, even her butt is showing!"

"No!"

"And they eat the same oatmeal my mom eats."

“That means your mom probably sleeps with her butt showing.”

“No!”

“Yes!”

“No!”

For extra effect, Rob produced the same type of ribbon Phyllis’ cousin Cynthia wore. He tied the ribbon to Phyllis, who Lara clearly saw blush, even in the fire flicker, before quickly untying the ribbon again. Then, as he moved to untie Cynthia’s ribbon, she fell away from the fire. When he centered a flashlight beam to illuminate her face, a carefully placed camp-issued jacket gave the impression, for a moment of delighted screams, that Cynthia’s head had swear to God and the other Owls and Marie-Marie, fallen off!

Lara asked Thaddeus to follow her thread to its final conclusion as he broke the crystallized grip around the maple syrup bottle from previous pouring. He filled each indentation in his second waffle to the brim with syrup. She picked at her waffle, cold from her absentminded mistake of too much sour cream topping. She also noticed a small jar of jam Thaddeus had warmed on the stove to pour over the sour cream.

“I have never been the same since that night. And not because of my record-breaking crush on Rob or wishing I had white-blonde hair, but because I realized the length a man will go to, even risking the death of his beloved, just to reveal her one kept secret, whatever that secret might be.”

“That’s what you got out of all of that?” Thaddeus tucked a ripe blueberry into each syrupy pool until his waffle looked more like geometry than breakfast.

“And the idea that, someday, somewhere, I will meet a man who will risk my untimely demise just so he can see me fully exposed, which I guess can technically be considered overexposure, is my go-to fantasy.”

The warmed jam looked like blood when Thaddeus dipped his thumb in the berry compote and rubbed a dark red line around Lara’s neck. “This is how I mark you,” he said. He looked into her eyes without once glancing away.

Lara felt her body keen towards him. If Thaddeus was not her ideal match, he moved closer to fulfilling her fantasy than any man before him. As he slowly licked the jam line off her neck, even in back without one pause when his tongue bumped against the resistance of Lara’s hairline, she promised to do everything to keep him wanting to lick her more.

The next morning Lara greeted Thaddeus at breakfast, this time oatmeal, steel-cut from the fancy can, not the round canister of her summer camp days, with a pink ribbon the color of a dyed Easter egg tied tight around her neck.

“Cute, but I don’t know if the Victorian look suits you.” Thaddeus sat at the breakfast table. He sprinkled brown sugar on his oatmeal though Lara had already told him sugar negates the heart-healthy advertising platform. “I know,” he answered before she spoke, “but what can I say. I guess I’m craving sugar after what happened last night.”

Lara stared at Thaddeus and his adulterated oatmeal.

“And I guess, from the prim ribbon, that either you’re really trying to land the school marm look or you, too, want more?” Thaddeus moved to untie Lara.

“No, you mustn’t do that.”

“Oh really?” Thaddeus pushed his oatmeal aside. “And why is that?”

“Because if you remove my ribbon, my head will fall off.”

“Very funny.” He placed his fingers close to the knot Lara had tied behind her neck.

“I mean it. If you don’t move your hands away, I’ll scream.”

“Okay okay.” Thaddeus shifted from Lara. He picked at his sugary oatmeal.

Lara finished two soft-boiled eggs with pepper. The whole kitchen smelled like soft-boiled eggs. Lara guessed a woman whose head fell off if anyone removed her ribbon would never have breakfast in a kitchen that smelled of soft-boiled eggs.

“Is this some kind of role-playing thing?” Thaddeus asked. “Like they used to show on *Red Shoe Diaries* in the 90’s. You know, the woman who could only have sex if her boyfriend pretended to be a fireman.”

She stood from the table and cleared the breakfast dishes. “This,” she pointed to her pink ribbon without touching, “just is.”

In the following days Lara wore a lemon-yellow ribbon, then a tan ribbon with laced edges. A blue ribbon the color of the famous Tiffany’s box followed the red ribbon Lara thought Thaddeus stared at more than any of her other ribbons combined.

A few weeks since the appearance of Lara’s first ribbon he asked, “So if your head can supposedly fall off without a ribbon, how do you keep changing colors every day?”

“Do you want to see?” she asked.

The black satin ribbon, an identical match in width and sheen to the ribbon Phyllis’ cousin wore all those years ago at summer camp, Lara had saved until Thaddeus asked how she changed colors without eminent decapitation.

Of course she knew it was all just a game. How she danced on the precipice of really liking a man, this man, so close to the edge she worried about her boyfriend experiencing that first pang of boredom that unravels every knot of possibility. He would start to look at porn

instead of at her. She would try to figure out what porn he looked at before realizing a woman with average-sized thighs could never compete. He would stay late at work. She would stay later at work to avoid finding out just how late he stayed.

Lara wanted to be with Thaddeus because he did rare, sensitive things, like buy her Sugar in the Raw to use in her coffee when she spent the night at his house without her having to ask. He never called Lara a hypocrite when she poured four packets into each coffee cup while playfully castigating Thaddeus for his brown sugared oatmeal.

As Lara smoothed the imaginary wrinkles from the black satin ribbon by rubbing the ribbon between her hands, she wondered what happened to Phyllis' cousin. Had Cynthia ever again worn a black ribbon around her neck? No doubt she had babies, maybe even by now grown-up children with their own babies. Lara knew to never tie a ribbon around a baby's neck. She wondered, if she had a baby girl, would she inherit her curse? Then she remembered it was all just make-believe.

When a couple makes believe something so long, Lara had worn ribbons every day for weeks, the line between real and imagined blurs like any couple's collective memory. Even if Thaddeus tore the ribbon from her neck, her head would stay securely attached; blood, bone, ligature, skin. She knew this the way she knew what she looked like before any obsessive examination in her own bathroom mirror. Still, when she showed Thaddeus how she tied each new ribbon over the old before gently pulling the old ribbon out from under the new in a maneuver she had already mastered like a sleight-of-hand magician, she felt a little concerned.

"But what do you do with the old ribbons?" Thaddeus asked. He stared at the striking black line.

"I fold them up and put them in a drawer in case I want to wear one of them again."

“I find you so unusual,” he said.

Lara led him to her bedroom dresser to show off her ribbons. “Good,” she answered.

“Good.”

The couple agreed not to get bored of each other, not to take each other for granted, not to do all those small things that ruin the big picture. Thaddeus stayed the night enough nights to only go home for mail and underwear. Then he stopped going to his apartment at all.

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“Look, your first piece of mail with your new address. But I think it should be required by law that, once a man is engaged, the post office stamps “Hubby-to-Be” on each piece.”

“Even junk mail?” Thaddeus hammered a nail to hang his framed college diploma in the home office they now shared.

“Yes of course.” Lara wore a calico ribbon decorated in rhinestones.

“I would never do such a thing,” Thaddeus said. He kept hammering.

Lara tugged at her ribbon. Was he getting sick of her? Tired of her charade to exist as a woman much more mysterious, at least one who holds a deep body mystery involving decapitation by silk, then she actually was. In real life the Real Lara liked to eat tuna noodle casserole. In real life sometimes grey lint collected in her navel. In real life her body, at least since her last doctor’s visit, was hooked up the way every other body hooked up.

Thaddeus continued. “I could never do such a thing because I couldn’t stand making the mailman so jealous he’d want to die, Wifey-to-Be.”

Hubby and Wifey, sweet to each other in that sickening way people in public turn their heads to avoid. But Lara and Thaddeus existed in private, her house now their house, his manicotti recipe now hers, as ribbons wound like colorful snakes around every free space in every dresser drawer.

The evening before their wedding Thaddeus cleared his throat at the dining table. He pushed away his half-eaten salmon filet. In a mock proclamation he announced, “It’s official. I have decided I like the black ribbon best.”

Lara wore the black ribbon. She caressed its sateen border. “I knew it. All these months, actually. But I hope you understand I already committed to wearing a blue one tomorrow, as in Something Old, Something New. But, still, I knew it.”

Thaddeus leaned in closer to her neck. He examined the thick black gash. “But how did you know?”

“The way you look at me each time I wear it gives you away. The way you size me up, so to speak. The way I can tell you want nothing more than to take my black ribbon off.”

Lara cleared the dinner dishes, careful to place the salmon skin and bones in a freezer bag before their disposal. The couple had decided to spend the night before their wedding together. After sleeping in the same bed every night for over six months, they almost didn’t know what else to do.

Thaddeus and his bride-to-be got ready for bed in separate bathrooms down the hall from each other, an early agreement that he claim the guest bath as his own. No one needed to watch each other brush their teeth. Lara didn’t want Thaddeus to discover that, even on the nights they showered separately, she kept her ribbon on. At this point she had repeated the phrase to her

groom-to-be so many times, she herself was not positive her ribbon did not, in fact, hold her head in place.

“How do you know I want to rip your black ribbon off your creamy neck while you sleep?”

The couple faced each other in bed. City light from behind the curtain helped them see almost as clear as at daybreak.

“Because that’s what you’ve always wanted to do.” Lara brushed a sensual finger across her black ribbon. “Isn’t that even why you proposed to me? Because you hoped beyond hope than on our wedding night I would remove my ribbon, and it would feel so close to having sex with a virgin that you would feel your own rebirth?” She stroked Thaddeus’ handsome cheeks. “Both of us together, naked and innocent the way no one’s been allowed to exist since Internet porn.” Lara giggled close to his ear as she molded her body into his.

“Even as naked as John and Yoko?”

“If not just like them, then very, very close. Except that I can’t remove my ribbon, no matter how much I want to. Not even tomorrow night, and not even for you.”

“What?” Thaddeus sat up in bed like his whole body felt an electric shock.

“It’s simple, my sweet, delectable Hubby-to-Be. If I remove my ribbon, my head will fall off.”

Thaddeus jumped from the bed and flipped on the light. “What the fuck are you talking about? Are you fucking crazy? Is this all some sort of elaborate fucking joke to you?”

“Calm down.” Lara felt to make sure her ribbon stayed secure against her neck. “And you know I hate it when you say the F-word so much.”

Thaddeus ran from the light switch to Lara's side of the bed. "Take it off!" he yelled close to her face.

"No, I told you I can't."

"Do it! Now!"

Thaddeus stared at Lara like he wanted to strangle her with her own ribbon. His tender arms became a flexed series of aggression. She could smell his warm body, the oily leftover salmon that would not rinse off his hands after dinner. His pupils narrowed to pinpricks of black in the celestial blue of his eyes. She had never guessed a baby-faced man with blue eyes the color of an antique glass bottle could make all the hairs on her body stand up from her skin.

"I told you I can't." She held the ribbon so tight, Lara struggled for air.

In an angry silence punctuated by the brusque movement of muscle becoming threat, Thaddeus snatched the ribbon from Lara's neck. The black satin gave to the strength of his fingers with one quick, yet emphatic, tug.

He gripped the black ribbon, which seemed to almost squirm in his hand, like a hard-won trophy. He even thrust the spent ribbon towards the glaring overhead bedroom light before being released from his trance by his Wifey-to-Be grasping for air.

"Oh cut it out," he said. "We both know you're fine. Move your hair so I can see."

Lara's neck looked just like Thaddeus had remembered, without even a discolored line where Lara's ribbon had been, the way skin covered by a cast always turns a little pale, a little yellow.

"See, you're fine, just like I said."

"Yeah, I guess," she answered.

“We’d both talked about, well, you know what, so many times, in the back corner of my most crazy thoughts I wondered if what you said could be true, though I knew it was all just pretend.”

“Yes, all just pretend,” Lara said.

“I guess we should get some sleep before the big day, Wifey-to-Be.” Thaddeus dropped the black ribbon onto his side table. He turned off the bedroom light and crawled into bed.

“Okay, Hubby-to-Be. But if, like you said, hidden somewhere behind your most crazy thoughts, you almost believed my head would fall off, why did you take off my ribbon, anyway?”

Lara turned from him in bed. Thaddeus turned from Lara in the dark. Neither wished the other sweet dreams as they waited for a sleep to meet them.