

2,208 words

The Second Liosia

Over their twice-monthly pint of Guinness, two friends discover that their babies-to-be, the first for each man, are due only a week apart and that both will be daughters. The fair-haired friend's happy exultations touch off a series of congratulations from the other patrons; the bartender, who has little girls of his own, serves them several more rounds on the house. The fair-haired one doesn't often drink this much, and as he dives into the third pint's creamy head he finds himself telling his dark-haired friend the name he and his wife have chosen for their child, the very thing he has sworn to his wife he would not do.

"You won't believe this," returns the dark-haired one, his expression unreadable, "but we're naming ours Liosia, too."

"Isn't that a billion to one," says the bartender, as for the hundredth time he passes through the two friends' conversation on his way to the dishwasher. "That's one you don't hear every day. Not like having two little Sarahs."

But of course this third coincidence isn't really coincidence; both men, in proposing the name to their wives some weeks earlier, were thinking of the eponymous Liosia from the Basilica of Saint Liosia of Córdoba at the boys' school from which the dark-haired one graduated the year before the fair-haired one. Of the early nineteenth-century Spanish portrait hanging on one of the basilica's walls, surrounded by informational placards, Liosia's tale of faithful wifedom and martyrdom distilled into adolescent-friendly bullet points. Intended probably to teach the boys of the school something-or-other about apostasy and blasphemy and how the strength of

Felix and Liliosa's union fortified them against religious tyranny; and also, probably, as a subtle elbow to the boys' collective manhood, a hint as to what one should require of a suitable wife.

For both men, the theological details are hazy. What they remember is that of all the austere saints that stared at them from various walls all over campus, only Liliosa had been depicted with preternatural loveliness, her skin pale and glowing, the suggestion of cleavage at the collar of her decidedly not-Muslim gown. Their first introduction, the two friends', had taken place in the basilica, each one trying and failing to make sense of the words on the placards to fulfill some end-of-semester assignment. The dark-haired sophomore, his hand on the other boy's shoulder blade, had joked about stealing the picture for his own use in the dormitory at night, about the bizarreness of the artist's choice to render a symbol of virtue as *so fucking sexy*, lapsing impressively back and forth between exactly the right liturgical terms and his own easy profanities. The fair-haired freshman had laughed just enough to be companionable without overdoing it, the blond hairs rising on his freckled slim forearms. Neither boy was Catholic.

Even three beers in, the fair-haired one realizes the weight of the breach they've committed. It has been revealed that both friends struggled to talk their wives into the name, and that both succeeded only when the wives—the dark-haired one's whirling, eclectic, large-breasted painter; and the fair-haired one's petite cactus of a woman, who perceives judgment from all around her and sprouts new spines whenever she does—were convinced that the name's undeniable uniqueness would create just the impression they wanted in their respective circles. The rarity is its major selling point. The fair-haired one knows their wives will be furious at this coincidence that no longer is.

He knows this because there is and always has been an odd current between each man and the other's wife, and between the two wives themselves. It's why the twice-monthly pints have never expanded to become group events, why their handful of double dates elsewhere have always left the two friends feeling strange and sullen. The wives will not want duplicate Liliosas.

The fair-haired one knows that, now that he has let the name slip, he should certainly go home and confess to his wife, offer up apologies, let her fume and then start to work out a truly unique replacement. Instead he lets gulp after gulp of malty dark liquid fill his throat and clinks his dark-haired friend's glass each time the bartender refills it.

And instead of telling his wife at some later date, he vibrates for months with excitement at the secret knowledge. The Liliosa stirring in his wife's belly resolves a years-old feeling that set in at the basilica, that grew as the dark-haired friend led the boys' school's rowing team to repeated victories with his powerful, rock-shouldered strokes, barking throatily at the stern; casually and capably delivered valedictorian speeches each of his upperclassman years, his smile a gleaming orthodontia advertisement. As the fair-haired friend switched sports every semester, playing anything at all only because it was a graduation requirement; spent his own sophomore year on academic probation after too many weeknights spent watching rowing practice. Telling anyone who would listen that he was friends with the captain.

You mean *coxswain*, the dark-haired one corrected him occasionally.

I like captain better, said the fair-haired one.

And of course the boys' school delivered the dark-haired one out into the world first, the very next year's alumni newsletter the first of several to crow about his post-graduation achievements. The Ivy League degree he earned in three years instead of four, his impressive

post-collegiate studies and widely lauded doctoral dissertation, his marriage to a lovely painter who glowed on his arm. All these things agitating in the fair-haired one's soul a feeling that now now he would never catch up, plodding bereft through his senior year of high school and then finishing college on schedule, putting him at a two-year disadvantage to the other man. Even when it turned out that, the two young men laying roots in the same city, the dark-haired one had loosened up a bit and seemed perfectly willing—eager, even—to continue their boyhood friendship, preferably over pints.

The fair-haired one's feeling of being *too late* ignited a constant need to do what he could to generate impressive material for their earliest regular Guinness meetings. Even an amateur would recognize this explains his choosing the same field for his own graduate studies, his pushing himself to absurd heights of achievement. You could say, maybe, that this also explains the quick consecutive weddings, explains the Liliosas who are practically twins gestating inside different mothers.

The dark-haired one's wife gives birth to the first Liliosa four days past her due date and in the wee hours of the morning—and this is the early nineties, the commonplaceness of cell phones still months or years in the future—so when the fair-haired one's wife gives birth shortly afterward, at sunup (three days ahead of her due date), she still believes hers is the only Liliosa for miles around. “Maybe even the only one born in the country this year,” she says happily as their new child roots around in search of her full breast. She has done her research, going so far as to contact the Social Security Administration for naming records, satisfying herself that as of at least the previous few years there have been none. That her husband has gifted to their child a truly unique name.

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The ink on both birth certificates is four days' dry before the illusion breaks, the necessary phone calls exchanged. The wives congratulate each other by phone and the fair-haired friend watches with the second Liliosa over his shoulder as his wife's smooth face turns stony, as she lets the appropriate words fall from her lips in the tone she modulates so carefully whenever she is required to speak with this other wife. Her black eyes are already spilling tears before she hangs up the phone and she turns her back to hide it from her stammering, fair-haired husband.

This moment will punctuate the narrative of their relationship forever; she will joke about it bitterly at parties and use it as leverage three years later when a second daughter arrives, needing a name. The fair-haired friend will not be given a say this time around and will learn to be grateful that his wife's obsession with consistency runs deeper than her grudge on this issue. She will walk to the library several times and hunt through books about Roman Catholic saints until she finds an appropriate sister name for Liliosa. The two girls, Liliosa and Leocadia, will assume without question that their names were chosen in advance and in tandem, part of their parents' premeditated plan to imbue them with virtue borrowed from someone else's religion.

Eventually, despite his dark-haired friend's cryptic circular remarks on the topic, the fair-haired one becomes aware that the birth of the second Liliosa was the triggering event behind the end of the other marriage. (The fair-haired one is sorry to hear it, but his relief is undeniable. Something inside him has always worried that he would never love his own wife as the dark-haired one seemed to love the painter.) The pieces of a story assemble themselves over prescheduled pints of Guinness that grow less and less frequent and eventually end altogether. Words were had and accusations made; the painter slapped her dark-haired husband across his chiseled face and threatened worse; neighbors appeared and were perhaps mistaken as to who had been

the aggressor. By now the fair-haired one is limited to a timeframe that only allows for one beer, so he has neither time nor courage to ask for more details. Such as: Why not warn the painter wife in advance about the other Liliosa, which surely at least one of the two friends should have done?

No: The fair-haired one prefers to spend their precious pub minutes in the present, in which his dark-haired friend is still king of worldly conversation and of lapses between the profoundly philosophical and the irreverent, and in which his smile still gleams as brightly as it did in his coxswain days.

Many years later, the dark-haired one sees his daughter's first name on the roster for one of his adjunct psychology classes in the random city in which he's reinventing himself after his most recent divorce. His students this year are about his daughter's age; and while the last name is wrong, he lets his eyes search the room for someone who reminds him of his first wife the painter. Seeing no one, he looks back at the roster and forces himself to admit to willful forgetting: This Liliosa has the last name of his friend from back home, the boys' school, the basilica. He searches again, this time for a girl with his old friend's fair coloring or the uptight wife's smooth Japanese features or some combination thereof, and comes up with too many possibilities.

He calls roll and asks the students to let him know about any preferred nicknames. He has heard that his own Liliosa answers to *Lili* and wonders whether this one does too.

But: "I go by Leo," she says when he reaches her. She's none of the ones he'd guessed; her hair is dyed to the color of cherry cola, buzzed short on one side and chopped roughly on the

other to cover half of her forehead and one almond-shaped eye. Everything about her—the tattoos climbing her willowy arm, her boyish snug clothing—is unexpected, but he can see his friend somehow in the planes of her lightly freckled face. He knows from the internet that she is a child of privilege, her father famous nationwide for a syndicated advice column he writes drawing on the years of his professional experience and his solid 25-year marriage, with occasional dashes of wisdom from the boys' school thrown in.

From Leo's comments in class, the dark-haired man will piece together that she loves her father and is proud of his successes, his impeccable moral integrity. That she loves but rebels against her thorny mother. He will also discover by putting out careful feelers that she has no idea who he is, her father's old friend from the basilica, has probably never heard his name or seen a photo. His hair is not so dark anymore, anyway.

Toward the end of the school year, even though one of the best parts of being his age is that he's no longer distracted by the desire to fuck half his students every semester, the dark-haired adjunct professor will seduce Leo at his apartment off campus and be crushed with outside disappointment when she doesn't want to turn it into a regular happening. When she tells him she's sorry, but that he's catching her just a year or two too late for this to be the sort of thing she'd go for. When she slides back into her skintight black denim and flannel and goes in a hurry, leaving her pint glass nearly half full on his nightstand.