

FICTION

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When, Before and After She Learned About Trudy

WHEN SHE LEARNED ABOUT Trudy, Priscilla found her husband's infidelity ludicrous, absolutely absurd, a farce. Trudy Fairchild? Not, surely not, pathetic Trudy Fairchild, her pretentious loft a shrine to Martha Stewart, married to a much younger husband, a not terribly bright, reactionary, periodically unemployed marketing manager, who often introduced himself as a road warrior. Trudy always breathlessly introduced herself as an editor at Wired Ottawa, although she merely edited copy. Jorge couldn't possibly caress Trudy. Stroke spindly Trudy's stingy legs? Ugh!

They'd met Trudy when she'd been checking quotes for an article about them in Wired Ottawa's series called Wild Women Married to Wild Men. Trudy gushed they were too too delightful, unlike the Governor General, Adrienne Clarkson, and John Ralston Saul, quibblers par excellence. Jorge said that calling Ralston Saul a wild man was like labelling Lassie a wolf.

"Well, you're certainly no Lassie," Trudy giggled, and invited them to brunch. Trudy held brunches the first Sunday after every full moon, such a silly affectation, but Jorge always insisted on accepting. He claimed visiting Trudy was an anthropological expedition to study the lumpen bourgeoisie in their unnatural habitat.

Before she learned about Trudy, less often after, Priscilla advised aspiring poets to practice a craft. "I learned to write poetry weaving with Mayan women." She loved weaving her questions about existence into poems on yellow legal pads. Jorge insisted she buy an egg timer to limit this. She protested, saying she needed

to doodle to discover what she felt. Jorge agreed, but said down time was essential for thoughts to coagulate just below consciousness.

Before, and more so after, Priscilla learned about Trudy, Jorge despised John Updike and his *New Yorker* ilk. They'd never hacked Cuban sugar cane or milked Kurdish goats or smuggled American cash to Chilean students sabotaging Pinochet. Jorge had, despising the publisher who'd promised to publish Jorge's novel about smuggling greenbacks across the Andes, if Jorge cut the tedious Leninist analysis. "It's Trotsky, not that shit Lenin, and you want another uncontextualized adventure story about a teenager finding himself," protested Jorge.

"Precisely, and go light on the finding-yourself bits," smiled the publisher, obviously not terribly impressed with what Jorge had found. Jorge had complied, both sales and reviews had been humiliating, and he'd vowed never to compromise again, although he now realized that Trotsky was wrong, another purveyor of overarching narratives. Jorge continued searching for principles to guide the exposure of IMF and World Bank atrocities against developing nations without being mindlessly prescriptive.

Not long before Priscilla learned about Trudy, Jorge suggested he and Priscilla rent a cottage to commune with ocean breezes, a raspberry patch, pebbles clattering as the tide receded, storms, especially storms, even the fog, particularly the fog, an ally embracing their solitude. Maybe, just maybe, surely, they'd spot a whale. They motored across the narrow causeway only because two months of clothing and a week's worth of food were too heavy for bikes, but the instant their goodies were safely stowed in the small fridge and two bottles of wine (we're radicals, not Puritans, Jorge often said) nestled in a bucket of freezing ocean water, they jumped on their bikes, rode down the spit past the fishermen's huts, regretting that nowadays tourists had replaced real fishermen because factory ships had decimated the cod, which fishermen centuries ago had scooped from the ocean in baskets. They biked back across the chilly causeway.

"Absolutely brilliant," said Jorge, when they reached the bay, fringed by the mainland's scrub forest. Loggers had hacked down the first-growth trees a century ago; vandalism, yes, it was vandalism, replicated globally. Priscilla's poem, "Denounce the Devastation," was a dirge of curses to chant against callous capitalism. She had insisted on only one condition: Jorge would do all the chores in East Pugwash, thirty kilometres away, while she stayed by the ocean. Surprisingly, he'd eagerly agreed to fetch the mail there.

A loon dove. Jorge, giddy with rebellion, retrieved an old cell phone from his backpack, anticipating a summer without cell phones, without any kind of phone for that matter, which meant no e-mail too. No Internet either. No CDs or cassettes in the cottage, no TV, no VCR. Ripping the sound system from their Volvo was excessive, so Jorge disconnected it. Pagers, personal organizers and radios had been left in New Philistinia, their pet name for the city that unjustly ignored them. But that was okay; they were tired of explaining that the nonsense about will-Jean-Chrétien-resign was journalistic masturbation, not political analysis. Alice Monro's characters simply ignored politics, real politics, radical analysis; no wonder critics drooled over her mystifications. Somebody really should deconstruct her and Margaret Atwood too.

The cell phone floated briefly. It probably had some sort of radioactive something or other; all those gadgets, which nobody needs, pollute the environment. One morning Priscilla had peered between her skates through the ice of New Philistinia's canal and spotted a fish, swimming through supermarket shopping carts, bicycles, a TV set, and even a computer. She phoned the works department to complain. "Since amalgamation we don't have the money to clean the city," complained a bored clerk. Priscilla had woven the shopping carts into a poem about globalization. The will to control, to render everything homogeneous, was the root of evil, not money.

"We're like the canal," Jorge said. "We need to dredge New Philistinia's debris from our minds."

Before she learned about Trudy, but certainly not after, Priscilla admired Jorge's openness to criticism. He sought constructive criticism. When they'd first collaborated, he complained her critiques of his political analyses were too forgiving and prepared

ten points to help her skewer his drafts. At first, she'd had to steel herself, but soon learned to be a deft critic. Had she become too astute?

A few weeks before she learned about Trudy, Priscilla and Jorge found waking every morning to enveloping fog depressing. They donned sweaters they'd bought on a Newfoundland book tour, thinking they'd shuck them by mid morning. Wrong! Breezes balked. Global warming? The tide seemed a sluggish lout, the fog too exhausted to lift. Seaweed stank. Humidity squalidly squatted on their solitude. To escape their bickering, Priscilla wandered down the spit. A young thin man, wearing a Yankees' baseball cap, was lugging stuff into a fishing hut. His Lincoln had Virginia plates.

"You come to fish?" she asked pleasantly, patting a damp cocker spaniel.

"Nope," he said and his cap fell off. She immediately recognized that peculiar baldness.

"Yeah. Chemo. I hope I'm done," he said.

"What's that?"

He'd brought a satellite dish, a TV, a VCR, boxes of video-cassettes, books, a cell phone, a computer, and more. Apparently, he and Jorge viewed technology differently.

"I'm Priscilla. My husband and I are in the cottage across there."

"Ian Carmichael." He grinned. "You waltz?"

"No, I'm a poet." She blushed at her inanity. Surely, poets waltzed. Ian suggested they skip formalities and spit out the essential information. Priscilla told him about Jorge, her poetry, New Philistinia, a technology-free summer and how this gulag of humidity was oppressing her. Rusty, the panting cocker spaniel, seemed to agree.

Ian was twenty-something, just finished a colossal course of chemotherapy, had been working for the World Bank (many places, mostly Asia, Africa and, of course, DC) when he'd been diagnosed, quit, and now had journeyed to the spit to laugh.

"Pardon?" Priscilla asked.

He intended to laugh away his cancer and showed her a book by Norman Cousins, who had successfully conquered cancer with laughter, which might not be the best medicine, but unques-

tionably was a dynamite support system. Ian displayed his cassettes: George Carlin, Lilly Tomlin, Woody Allen, Ellen Generes and younger comedians Priscilla didn't know. He had dozens of cassettes of some inane British comic, now dead and heartily despised by Jorge, named Benny Hill.

"And these are my backups," Ian said affectionately. When his cassettes failed, he'd seek refuge with P.G. Wodehouse. Ian had brought two complete Wodehouse book series, one about an English parasite, Bertie Wooster and his servant, Jeeves. Priscilla had snuck peeks of the series on PBS. The other was about a pig, the Empress of Blandings, and her owner, a duke. This must have been made into an old TV series too. Ralph Richardson, a fine English actor, appeared on the book jackets: he'd played the Duke.

"The Duke's a sensible sort; his only ambition is to win ribbons at the local agricultural fair. Alas, his frightful sister insists he behave ducally," chuckled Ian. "I used to read crap like philosophy, great books, economic reports, and the *New York Times*. When they said I might die, I realized it was time to get serious and read P.G."

A smidgen of smugness suggested he'd be delighted if she judged him a fool, better still a holy fool. Even the nicest men have terminal pretensions, Priscilla thought, and politely refused his offer to borrow a book.

"Great," Ian replied. "Come over and we'll read together. You can be Bertie and I'll be Jeeves. Rusty here can be the Empress of Blandings. Can your husband play the Duke?"

Not likely, thought Priscilla, and wondered why Ian was alone. She reckoned he'd be alone even if he'd come with dozens of friends.

After she learned about Trudy, doubts feasted on Priscilla's distrust. What about Jorge's story about smuggling dollars to Chilean radicals? He'd taken packed duffel bags of winter clothing and left them in Mendoza's bus station's restroom, while he waited in a cubicle. When he heard, "Muchas gracias, Señor," he emerged, loaded his bags onto the Argentinean bus, which hours later passed safely through Chilean customs in the high Andes. He claimed he'd only been nervous when the passengers' luggage was laid out on long rows of tables, the belongings pawed by inspectors. Jorge

smiled at the callow soldiers with serious guns, confident Pinochet would be deposed within six months.

Jorge checked into the appointed hotel in Santiago, making sure he was out every morning until well after lunch. On the third afternoon the desk clerk asked him to pay the bill since he'd be leaving the next morning. The money had been picked up.

Could be true. Could be not true. How long exactly had he cut sugar cane in Cuba? Priscilla told Ian about Jorge milking a Kurdish goat.

"Guilt goat," smiled Ian.

"What?"

"Ideological tourists always ride llamas, milk goats, and smoke up with the locals," he replied.

"That's offensive," said Priscilla.

"No. Funny," replied Ian.

When she learned about Trudy, Priscilla was hunting mushrooms in a copse where Jorge had warned her not to search because of poison ivy. She found his small briefcase in a hemlock's trunk, containing letters, addressed in loopy handwriting, roses drawn in the O's of Jorge on the envelopes. In one letter, a dog's breakfast of gooey sentiments, Trudy complained that she couldn't possibly write as often as her AMOUR Jorge. He must be mailing batches every time he went to East Pugwash. Handwritten letters! They hadn't brought a printer to the cottage. Priscilla was hurt and disgusted and laughing. The truth delivered quickly is funny, she thought, and then retched. Funny how quickly funny can become unfunny, she thought, and brushed leaves over her vomit, returning the briefcase to its refuge. Obviously, summer would fill it. No wonder that shit had eagerly agreed to fetch the mail in East Pugwash.

Ludicrous wasn't ludicrous enough to describe Trudy's giddy prose. She was POISED, yes, she wrote POISED—with a daffodil in the O—in Halifax, a port only two hours from the cottage. This was a TV movie too idiotic to be filmed. Trudy wrote she was surfing atop a huge wave. She was POISED atop a huge wave of fate and whether the wave would FLING her into Jorge's arms

FOREVER or onto a cold ocean never to make LOVE to Jorge—the O contained a carnation—again was uncertain. But at the right moment, she'd KNOW, she just knew she'd KNOW, the full MOON—both O's contained coneflowers—would tell her the right way to be flung. Apparently, Trudy couldn't write an O without imprisoning a flower. Priscilla couldn't quite recall the name of the poet who had written what Trudy paraphrased ineptly. That bastard, Jorge, wanted to summer near Halifax because Trudy was there, POISED there, for god's sake. Jorge was the supplicant of Trudy's body. Humiliation became humidity's twin oppressor.

Before, and after, she learned about Trudy, Priscilla's most anthologized poem was entitled ??? That was it, just three question marks, each line a question. Who tangled life up? What offence did whooping cranes commit? Does the deep plough lament it ploughs too deeply? Why do women of all beliefs bleed red?

Priscilla found questions more interesting than answers, which explained what she'd thought was her idyllic marriage. She asked, Jorge answered, she asked, he elaborated.

Trudy's letter parodied Priscilla's poem. Will Priscilla write another impenetrable poem when you tell her of your sweet MOUTH on my eager BREAST? Has Priscilla figured out who tangled life up? Was the offence of whooping cranes their WHOOPING? Do you know your Trudy's wet for YOU, Jorge?

Jorge was acting like an arrested adolescent. Why? She thought she knew the answer, or at least partly: Priscilla asked, Jorge answered, Priscilla asked, Jorge elaborated, Priscilla asked again, never finding Jorge's answers completely convincing. Time had rendered many of them stale.

Not so Trudy. She asked, Jorge answered, she gushed how wise. The thought of Trudy, gushing, intertwined with Jorge, shook Priscilla.

A month after she learned about Trudy Priscilla felt shabby, spying on Jorge from the small window of Seconds, a used clothing store in East Pugwash. She'd driven in with Ian. The storeowner, a chirpy woman, who'd moved to Nova Scotia from New Mexico during the Vietnam War, had hoped Priscilla came to sell designer

clothes. Sourness replaced chirp when she realized Priscilla wasn't shopping either. Jorge, in the post office kitty corner across the sweltering street, was handed a large brown envelope, which he immediately ripped open. Priscilla whipped across the street; Jorge quickly dumped the letter into a garbage can. Priscilla dove in and retrieved a cassette.

"The CIA, I presume," sneered Jorge, but only after retrieving the letter and hastily stuffing it into his wallet.

After she learned about Trudy, but before Jorge realized Priscilla knew, he told her that Ian's great wit, P.G. Wodehouse, was a fascist, a real one, who'd made wartime broadcasts from France supporting Hitler. It took a shocked Priscilla a few days to ask Ian. He said Wodehouse had blundered, after being captured by Nazis in France and taken to Berlin. The Germans had broadcast five interviews with Wodehouse to America. Even George Orwell had called them silly but harmless. The British had finally knighted Wodehouse, only delaying because of fears of American reaction.

Before she'd even suspected Trudy, Priscilla was shocked by Jorge and Ian's instant enmity. Perhaps it was Ian's offer to drop in and watch a Benny Hill video. Perhaps, it was Ian's mention that the Comedy Channel had run a program about aging radicals, perhaps Ian's mention he'd worked for the IMF before the World Bank. Jorge launched a diatribe against them. Their programs impoverished the poor and enriched the rich in the developing countries. They were exporters of credit to the rich and malnutrition to the poor. Priscilla discreetly signalled him to stop; he was right, of course, Jorge always was about these things, but Ian, concentrating on recovering from cancer, didn't need this.

"Jorge, I totally agree," smiled Ian. "Everybody does. Time to catch up. The world's moved on. Nobody's playing Trotsky's 45s anymore."

Ian later apologized to Priscilla, who said, "No need. It was a good shot."

"Yeah, but I want laughs without personal shots nowadays. Did I tell you I'm thinking about becoming a stand-up comic?"

Before she learned about Trudy, Priscilla told friends not to visit, hurt when most implied they wouldn't drive as far as Nova Scotia to visit God, not even the book editor of the *New York Times*. Her house sitter, a Eurasian sculptor, congratulated her on relying totally on quaint snail mail and suggested Jorge write a clever article about escaping technology. If a crisis, defined as a nuclear holocaust, an absolutely essential funeral or a contract that couldn't wait, erupted, a courier would be sent. They brought only one laptop. To safeguard time for reflection they vowed it would be booted only four hours a day, three for Jorge, one for Priscilla, since she wove her poems on yellow legal pads.

Well after she learned about Trudy, Ian's gratitude abruptly snuffed out Priscilla's infatuation, the flip side of a schoolgirl crush.

"My Aunt Dahlia's a bit miffed," Ian reported. Aunt Dahlia had phoned from New York, worried about Ian being alone. No problem, he'd told her: Priscilla came by every day to swap P.G. Wodehouse jests. "I could see that, if not actually disgruntled, he was far from grunted." "I was so darned sorry for poor old Corky that I hadn't the heart to touch my breakfast. I told Jeeves to drink it himself." "In my Rogue's Gallery of repulsive small boys I suppose he would come in about third."

Once Priscilla and Ian started an orgy of quotes, they couldn't stop. "Aunt Agatha, who eats broken bottles and wears barbed wire next to her skin." "Big chap with a small moustache and the sort of eye that could open an oyster at sixty paces." "It is never difficult to distinguish between a Scotsman with a grievance and a ray of sunshine."

"Priscilla's like an older sister to me," Ian had told Aunt Dahlia.

Apparently, Aunt Dahlia thought being Ian's older sister was her exclusive prerogative. Dahlia wasn't the only one miffed. Priscilla had fantasized more intimate behaviours than those permitted an older sister, positions that even the Duchess of Blandings might find shocking.

The morning before Priscilla spied from Seconds, Jorge, in one of his fouler moods, refused to shop in East Pugwash until the afternoon. After lunch, Priscilla decided to return a book to Ian

and walked along the spit, laughing. The poor Duke, desperately raising a prize pumpkin—the fair was only a week away, bugs were rampant—had another niece problem. He adored the niece—when she wasn't interfering with his agricultural pursuits—and had no objections to her marrying her impoverished suitor, a decent sort of chap. Alas, the Duke's sister objected and was harassing the Duke to forbid the infatuation in favour of her own candidate for the innocent niece's hand, a horrid pompous man, his dimness proved by his haughty contempt for pumpkins and pigs.

"How can a man so oppressed protect a plump pumpkin from predators?" she asked Ian.

"An existential question worthy of Sartre if he hadn't been on alcohol and drugs," he replied, telling her to hop in. He was driving to East Pugwash. Why not? On the way she asked what Ian intended to do after the summer.

"I told you already. Become a stand-up comic," he replied.

"You really are serious," she exclaimed.

"Dead serious. I'm writing jokes about the IMF, World Bank, and other aid agencies. The Peace Corp's a riot."

"Can't be easy writing jokes about foreign aid," opined Priscilla, her tone telegraphing disapproval.

"I was having a hell of a time until I found the formula. Tell the truth briefly. The rest's practicing your timing."

About, she thought, to learn more about Trudy, Priscilla, clutching the cassette drove back to the cottage with Jorge. He demanded she fork it over. "No way," she said, demanding an explanation. He refused, saying, "I'm not a character in the *New Yorker*."

"You're too trivial. And too fatuous for P.G. Wodehouse," she retorted.

"Give me my cassette."

"You can't listen to it here anyway."

"It's my fucking cassette."

She laughed. The jerk meant to hook up the car sound system. Asshole! She leapt from the Volvo, said she'd run over to Ian's for a listen, and provide Jorge with a précis. He chased her, howling "fascist cunt," only turning back when he saw Ian watching. She stopped abruptly. If she listened to Trudy's giddy gushes, she was a fascist. What to do? Ask Jeeves.

"Spot of trouble, Jeeves. Wouldn't mind a word," she said.

"I'll need your motor for a run down to the sea for a spot of sprat fishing," Ian replied. Both their English accents were atrocious. She told him about the cassette, he pondered, and found in the Lincoln's trunk a small metal case. It could be locked. Welded to it was a foot-long chain. Chain this to your water pump, Ian advised. Let Jorge suffer or pick the lock.

"Jeeves says it's dishonourable to listen to a purloined cassette, but not to employ it as an instrument of torture," Ian said confidently.

"Jeeves is one very cunning coot," Priscilla replied uncertainly.

That night a man yelled through a bullhorn from an emergency vehicle that Jorge and Priscilla had better evacuate or expect to bunker in the cottage without electricity. The gale would swamp the causeway. Most tourists had left before their fishing huts became dangerous sails. Jorge and Priscilla found a hurricane lantern and huddled around the kitchen table, listening to wind, rain, falling trees and then a banging at the door. It was Ian. He'd taken too long loading his technology into his Lincoln. The causeway wasn't yet underwater, but pelting rain obscured his escape route. He joined them at the kitchen table. Mostly, the three contemplated their folded hands, saying little, flinching when lightning brightened the troubled ocean, thunder exploded, and screeching winds shook the cottage. Rusty, the poor cocker spaniel, whimpered near the door, her front paws covering her head. Most terrifying were the interludes of absolute silence. Everyone tensed, jumping, yet relieved, when lightning, thunder and screeching resumed. Nobody went to bed, each catching catnaps, their arms on the table as pillows.

In the morning the fishing huts, save one, were off their foundations. Ian's had vanished, as had his satellite dish; other huts tilted at odd angles along the spit, still others were bits of plank and tarpaper strewn haphazardly. A small stove, fishing gear, underwear, even a ping-pong paddle, trailed along the spit. The ocean remained a stew of foam, tossing a second ping-pong paddle—why had someone brought ping-pong bats here?—out to sea and then churning it back toward the rocky beach. Priscilla spotted

ping-pong balls. The incoming tide was ripe with debris, not merely driftwood, but the flotsam and jetsam of an industrial society: oil cans, beer cans, plastic chairs, and this Priscilla couldn't believe, a shopping cart. East Pugwash didn't have shopping carts that huge. No cart that size could float; it certainly couldn't sail here on the gale.

Ian had been wrong. Jeeves wouldn't have devised a mean-spirited torture like chaining the cassette in full view of Jorge. It was neither clever nor elegant nor just. Worse, it lacked grace and Wodehouse was always gracious, at least in his books. A sneaky torture had answered Ian's need, which Priscilla hoped laughter would soon wash away. She had learned much from Mayan weavers, a bit from Jorge, but she lacked something Wodehouse possessed and a pinch, perhaps a heap, of whatever that was could lift her poetry.

She returned to the cottage. Ian's Lincoln had fled, she reckoned forever. Why was he so alone? She wondered if, perhaps in five years, she'd read he was appearing at Just For Laughs. Would she attend? Jorge, poor chump, was by the water pump, picking at the lock. She tossed him the key, said she'd pack, and would need a drive to Moncton in twenty minutes. She'd catch a train to Montreal and then Ottawa.

Jorge had been bull's-eye right about one thing. A summer by the sea had cleansed the debris of New Philistinia from her mind. Better still, P.G. Wodehouse had blown away the flotsam and jetsam of Jorge.

After she learned more about P.G. Wodehouse, Ian, Jorge, and Trudy and herself, Priscilla began exploring the meaning of wisdom. She asks many questions and buys many yellow legal pads. Some day she hopes to weave a poem at the intersection of outrage and laughter. Or on the loom of outrage and mirth? The loom of mirth and anger?

Not quite the right words, but she'll find them. Patience, the Mayan weavers had counselled.