

Elizabeth Dewberry

His Lovely Wife

Lawrence and I were meeting Eric and his new girlfriend for drinks at the Paris Ritz. We went to the Hemingway Bar in the back of the hotel first, which was closed for August, but we waited for them outside it for twenty minutes before we decided to try the other bar, and I can't stand to be late, so I was already bothered. But finally we found them, and Eric stood to kiss me on both cheeks even though he's American, and I didn't realize what he was doing until too late, and I bumped my forehead into his teeth.

Then Mart, who was over six feet tall, stood up, and Lawrence said, "And you must be Mart."

She held out her hand: "Yes."

How do you say yes condescendingly? It's one syllable. I don't know, but she managed it.

She's a physicist at a university in Germany, and she just published a paper with Eric in a prestigious journal, which Lawrence complimented her on lavishly.

Then Eric introduced me to her and we shook hands. She was wearing a mannish black pantsuit with a scarf at her neck that almost looked like a tie, no makeup, severely plucked eyebrows.

I was wearing a low-cut silk dress the color of a thunderstorm and high-heeled Mary Janes. My hair was long and stiff with hair spray and very blonde, and I was wishing I'd worn boots and a power suit with a tight bun.

Then we all sat down and Eric asked me how I'd been, but before I could answer, our waiter came over and asked if he could get us anything, and I thought—Yes, get me out of here.

Eric and Mart were halfway through their martinis with twists—I can't stand it when couples drink the same drink, it's too cute—and then Lawrence ordered one for himself and looked at me like didn't I want one, too? I couldn't do it. I scanned the little menu quickly and chose something I'd never had before. I'd never even heard of it.

When the waiter left, Eric said, "So, where were we?"

Mart said, "You were asking Ellen how she is," which was harmless

enough, but there was something about her tone that made it sound like she thought asking me how I am was the most idiotic, American thing Eric had ever done.

I said, "Yes. I'm fine."

Eric said, "Say that again. Say 'fine' in your Alabama drawl."

"Fine," I said.

"Sexiest accent in the world," he said.

"Are you from Alabama?" Mart said.

"Originally."

"Isn't that where Zelda Fitzgerald was born?" Mart said.

"She grew up in Montgomery. I'm from Birmingham."

"I just read a biography of her," she said. "What a waste of a life."

Then a tiny silence opened up over us and I fought the urge to explain the differences between Zelda and me, how she was from a different generation, a different part of Alabama, different family, completely different situation, not to mention that she married a very different kind of husband and she was mentally ill, because for one thing, Mart could have said she didn't mean to imply any comparison at all, I was just being paranoid.

So I should have just left the silence alone, but it made me uncomfortable, and I rushed to fill it: "Lawrence says you and Eric were just in Greece? I love Greece."

"Yes," she said, and she looked at me almost suspiciously, as if to say, What of it?

"Did you have a nice time there? Isn't it beautiful?"

"It was hot," she said and turned back to Lawrence and Eric. She didn't want the conversation to divide along gender lines—she wanted it to divide along physicist/non-physicist lines—and I couldn't really blame her. This was what she'd come to Paris for, not to talk Greek weather with an American housewife. Fine again.

—Where's that drink?

She said to Lawrence, "Have you read what Greene and Dyekman are working on, with spatial velocity?"

"Yes, I saw Dyekman in New York last month," Lawrence said. "We talked about it at length. Fascinating."

"How is Edward?" Mart said, and I got a feeling from the way she said his name, holding the W in her mouth just a fraction of a second longer than necessary, that she'd slept with him.

"He seemed fine," Lawrence said.

“Did you know his wife left him?” Mart said.

“No, he didn’t mention that. He had lost some weight,” Lawrence said. “But he looked good.”

“For a musician,” Mart said.

“A musician?” Eric said. “She left him for a musician?”

“A very famous one.”

“A fucking rock star?” Eric said.

“No,” Mart said, laughing, “a concert violinist. I can’t think of his name.”

“My God,” said Eric.

Lawrence turned to me, “Promise me if you ever leave me, it won’t be for a violinist.”

Eric and Mart laughed.

I said, “Okay. I’ll never leave you for anything less than a cellist.”

“A cellist?” Lawrence said. “That’s worse than a violinist.”

We were all laughing.

“Okay,” I said, “no musicians.”

“Thank you.”

“Could I leave you for a mathematician who plays in a country-western band on weekends?” I said.

“Do you have one in mind?”

“No. I just want to know all my options.”

“No. If he’s a mathematician—no matter what he is—he cannot be in a country-western band.”

“You’re not making this easy,” I said, and we all kept laughing.

Eric took my hand and said, “Mathematicians are intellectual masturbators. If you ever want to leave him, you just come to me.”

“Would that be okay?” I asked Lawrence. “Could I leave you for Eric?”

“Well, you could,” Lawrence said, “but why?”

We laughed again, though not as loudly as before.

I looked at Eric, who kissed my hand.

Mart said to Lawrence, seductively, “And where would that leave me?”

We were all still laughing, sort of.

Lawrence said, “Only time will tell.”

“Unless, of course, it’s moving at light speed,” Eric said to them, and Lawrence and K-Mart laughed.

I didn’t get it.

Eric said to me, “There is no passage of time at light speed. Anything traveling at the speed of light doesn’t have, well, time, to travel through time.”

“Thank you,” I said. I knew about there being no passage of time at light speed—that’s Physics 101. It just hadn’t struck me as funny.

“I prefer my time to travel very slowly,” Mart said to Lawrence, who said, “I bet you do,” while Eric said to me, “So light doesn’t age, it’s timeless.”

“It doesn’t age, but can it die?” Mart said. Then to me, “And of course it can’t, nothing dies, except . . . metaphorically.” And to Lawrence, “But what happens to it when it goes into a black hole?”

With “hole,” she shaped her lips into an O, like a kiss.

I looked at Lawrence too, and he threw up his hands, and Eric said, “Chaos.”

The three of them laughed out loud.

Some French call black holes hidden stars because the literal translation of black hole, *trou noir*, sounds too much like their slang for vagina. I didn’t know where Germans stood on the issue. Was she discussing vaginas and what happens inside them with Lawrence? In front of Eric? In front of me?

Eric said to me, “So tell me, my future paramour, what you’ve been up to?”

I glanced at Lawrence and said, pleasantly, that it had been a slow summer.

I didn’t mean anything seductive—I didn’t mean anything, it was a slow summer—but Eric raised his eyebrows as if I did and said, “You’re bored?”

I tried to laugh. “No,” I said. I’d had enough.

Then Lawrence volunteered that I’d been writing poetry.

“No I haven’t,” I said.

“Yes you have. She’s a wonderful poet. She’s being modest.”

“I have not,” I said.

Mart looked past the shiny black grand piano and the tuxedoed piano player, through the French doors, one of which was open to the fountain on the terrace: we’d been there less than five minutes, and she was tired of us all.

Eric wasn’t pressing for more information about the poetry, either, which was fine with me, as I didn’t want to keep discussing it.

Our table already had a little white dish full of salted almonds and

another full of dried fruit, which Eric and Mart hadn't touched, and our waiter brought some potato chips and phyllo pastry triangles, which, he explained, were stuffed with minced lamb.

Lawrence said, "Keeps a whole stack of poems locked away in a drawer."

I smiled, trying to cover how irritated I felt, and shook my head to get him to stop. I was trying to think of something to say to change the subject when our drinks arrived, doing it for me.

—Thank you, God.

I'd ordered something called an Iron Lion Zion—chocolate and banana liqueurs with rum—and it came in a sugared martini glass with a little piece of fudge stuck on the rim.

Lawrence lifted his martini and said, "Cheers," and Eric said, "To old friends," and I said, "Yes," and Mart kept her mouth shut and we all drank.

I took another sip. Then I put the fudge in my mouth and let it start to melt on my tongue.

Mart said in her Nazi accent, "You are having dessert first?"

She didn't approve.

I said, "Life is short," sounding like a bumper sticker.

I looked around. There was a beautiful harp next to the piano—inlaid wood, with gold gilt trim—though no one was playing it. I wondered if it was just for show. The piano's trophy harp.

I swallowed the fudge—I eat when I'm nervous—and took a bite of a lamb pastry.

I was thinking about Mart's bizarre sexiness and how there's something in physics called a strange attractor, a mathematical shape that looks sort of like multi-layered butterfly wings and that explains turbulence by showing how it follows its own set of rules, creating a pattern, just not one that we can see. According to the theory behind it, much of nature's apparent chaos is actually just invisible order. It was a comforting idea. Sort of.

—But then again, I thought, much of nature's apparent order—everything we can see—is, on a subatomic level, a great big mess.

"I'll Be Seeing You" segued into "The Last Time I Saw Paris" on the piano, and our table's conversation had come to an awkward halt when I heard a man's voice, a Texan, judging from his accent, say, "A big plate of spare ribs!" as if it was a punch line. Then he said, "Do they have spare ribs in Vienna?" I wanted to turn around and look at him, but I didn't.

Nobody else at my table seemed to have heard him, but Eric said “Oh!” as if to say, Speaking of punch lines. Then he touched my hand and said, “You’ll love this,” and I took another sip of my drink to keep him from holding my hand. He acted like he didn’t notice and said, “A poet, a priest, and a physicist walk into a bar, order a round of drinks. The bartender says, ‘You’re all story-tellers. You’re all trying to figure out the meaning of life. Tell me a story.’ So the priest says, ‘Well, first God created the universe, then man fucked it up, then God sent Jesus to fix things, and two thousand years later, here we are.’ Then the physicist says, ‘No, first there was chaos, then a big explosion, then the universe started evolving, and billions and billions of years later, here we are.’ Then the poet looks around, finishes his drink, and shoots himself in the head.”

We all laughed.

I could hear the bartender mixing a martini in a shaker, ice beating rhythmically against metal, like a headache.

Lawrence said, “But seriously, chaos before the Big Bang?”

Eric said, “Yeah, that’s why this physicist hangs out with priests and poets. He didn’t get tenure.”

Big laughs all around. Jokes about people who don’t have tenure never fail to get laughs from people who do.

I thought about pointing out yet again that I was not a poet, but decided against it.

Mart said, “I think before the Big Bang, there was another universe that had expanded and contracted, and before that, another, and before that, another and another and another, an infinite number.”

“How can you possibly say such a thing?” Eric said. Then, looking at Lawrence, “I sleep with her, but it’s like I don’t even know her.”

They laughed, and then they were off on a friendly but passionate argument about what came before the beginning of time, and the piano player started into “Stars Fell on Alabama Last Night,” and I thought, — This is my favorite rendering of the Big Bang.

WHEN WE GOT back to the room after dinner, I said, “Why did you say that, about me being a poet?”

“Because it’s true,” Lawrence said, taking off his jacket. “I was trying to rescue you.”

“But I’m not a poet. I’ve written half a dozen poems in the past year.”

I'd written seven, but I wasn't sure one of them was really a poem. I was also working on a children's book, though I hadn't told Lawrence. I was glad he didn't know about the children's book—glad, and sad that I was glad.

He went into the walk-in closet to hang up his jacket and I sat down on the edge of the bed.

"How many poems do you have to write to be a poet?" he said from the closet.

"More than six," I said, ready to drop the whole argument but not willing to say it didn't matter.

"How many?" he said, coming back out and facing me. Then, slightly sarcastically, "Ten? Fifteen?"

I swallowed. I was not drunk, but I'd had several glasses of wine—with dinner, over several hours. This was the kind of thing I usually let slide—I hadn't been stewing on it all through the meal—but I was pretty sure it wasn't because of the wine that I was saying something this time.

Lawrence said, "I just want to understand the rules here."

I said, "Sixty-four."

He put up his hands in mock surrender, then started emptying his pockets. He had notes scribbled on receipts and match-book covers and a page torn from a notebook with numbers written all over it, and he was putting them on the desk. I didn't know what the numbers meant and I didn't ask. I didn't know, and I did. They were his way of trying to figure out the universe, which had something to do with figuring out himself.

"Okay," he said. "I won't call you a poet."

"Thank you."

I sat in the chair and slipped off my shoes, which had been pinching my feet. I spread my toes as if they were strange little wings. I thought we were done. I wanted to be done. Or, part of me did. Part of me wanted to walk into the bathroom and close the door and not come out until I was ready to act like the whole poetry conversation—the whole evening—had never happened. But I just sat there, looking at my feet.

"But I didn't call you a poet," Lawrence said, loosening his tie. "I said you write poetry. And that's true."

I looked at him.

I said, "But why? Why did you have to say that? Especially after you'd just told Mart, one minute after meeting her, that the way her paper on

string theory connected the movement of quarks with the orbits of binary stars was a stunningly elegant marriage of science and poetry.”

“Are you jealous of her?”

“Should I be?”

“Please. It was Eric’s work. He supposedly co-wrote it with her, but it was clearly his work, his fingerprints were all over it.”

“So why did you say it?”

“Ellen, that’s what people do. You get a paper published, you expect your colleagues to tell you they read it and liked it, whether they actually give a shit or not.”

“No, why did you say I wrote poetry? Do you have some sort of Emily Dickinson fantasy about me?”

Lawrence was neatly folding his tie. He liked expensive ties, and he always took special care with them, which suddenly bothered me. He always wore Brooks Brothers all-cotton Oxford button-down shirts, medium starch, white or light blue, and he always kept his shoes—black Italian leather wingtips—perfectly shined. I liked this about him in the beginning—most scientists have no fashion sense at all—but now it struck me as arrogant and boring at the same time.

“I promise you,” Lawrence said, “I have never had any kind of Emily Dickinson fantasy. If I had to have an Emily Dickinson fantasy, I wouldn’t know where to start. Wasn’t she a virgin spinster?”

I stood up and took off my pantyhose, draped them over the back of a chair.

“Don’t,” I said. “I’m asking you, do you have a fantasy that I’m a great poet, a great intellect—a great anything—but nobody knows?”

Lawrence’s first wife, who died of breast cancer, was a great chemist. Ironically, she spent much of her career working on a drug to treat breast cancer.

—Do you wish I were a scientist?

Lawrence said, “No.”

I wanted him to put his arms around me. I wanted him to say he loved me, he wasn’t ashamed of me, didn’t secretly wish I was anything other than what I was. I wanted him to say, You are great. You’re a great friend, a great lover, a great wife, a great mother to my son, and those things mean more to me than if you were the greatest poet in the world.

But he just said no, and something shifted in me, something so deep inside me that it almost felt like it was underneath me, the ground moving under my feet, and all I could think about was keeping my

balance, and all I could say was, “No?”

He said, “I can’t say anything right, can I?”

I said, “You can.”

And I waited one, two, three, long, silent seconds.

Then I said, “But you don’t.”

He said, “What do you want me to say?”

“Nothing.”

—If I have to tell you to say it before you say it, then it wouldn’t count when you did.

He sat on the edge of the bed, setting his tie on the nightstand, and bent over to untie his shoes.

I wanted to let it go—part of me did—but I couldn’t.

I tried again. I was trying to redo the moment, better, and to undo it, to make it disappear by replacing it with another. I made my voice sound calm: “You wanted Eric to think I had whole manuscripts hidden away in the attic, that I have everything it takes to be famous except the fame.”

“God, Ellen. One, I don’t care if you write poetry. I said that because I thought you cared. Two, if I did have a fantasy about you being secretly famous, I wouldn’t . . . I mean, name one famous poet.”

“Emily Dickinson!” I said.

I stood up and took off my dress. I wasn’t wearing a bra.

He carried his shoes into the closet. I knew without looking that he was placing them carefully on the floor, side by side, exactly parallel to each another, not touching.

“So why did you say it?” I said, raising my voice just a little to compensate for his being out of sight. I draped my dress over the back of the chair with my pantyhose. When he didn’t answer, I said, “I don’t care that much about poetry to begin with, but to the extent that I do, I certainly don’t care whether Eric thinks I’m a poet. But wouldn’t it be perfect for you if I was? Because I could be as famous in my field as you are in yours, or better yet, almost as famous, but it would be a totally esoteric kind of fame that would never for one second eclipse yours.”

He came out. “There is no such thing as esoteric fame,” he said, unbuttoning his shirt. He was in his sock feet.

I hadn’t meant fame. I’d meant respect. I’d meant accomplishment. I knew he didn’t care if I was famous. I’d fucked up my own argument.

—Idiot.

While he unbuttoned his cuffs, he said in a pseudo-calm, “My point

is, if I had some absurd fantasy that you were famous, or semi-famous, or not-famous, or whatever it is we're talking about, which I don't, I wouldn't fantasize that you were a poet. Give me a little credit."

Then he went back into the closet to hang up his shirt.

I said, "Is that your whole response to what I just said?"

He walked out and stopped. Stopped talking, stopped undressing. Looked at me.

"Okay," he said. "I know you sometimes feel insecure around Eric, and I was just trying . . ."

I was standing in front of him, naked except for some see-through panties.

I said, "Trying what?" and sat down on the bed. I folded my arms across my stomach.

"I don't know," he said.

"Yes you do. Say it. You were trying to make it look like I had a reason to feel good about myself, like I'd accomplished something. But you had to make something up to do that. Jesus, Lawrence, do you have any idea how that makes me feel?"

"Obviously not."

He sat down next to me on the bed, and I stood up.

I went into the bathroom. I looked at my make-up spread out all over the counter and stuffed it back into its case. I slipped on a robe, brushed my teeth, rubbed moisturizer onto my legs, flossed, peed, washed my hands, washed my face, applied wrinkle treatment.

When I came out again, he was in bed, in his pajamas, reading. He looked up.

I took a bottle of water out of the mini-bar, poured some into a glass.

I said, "Do you want some of this?"

"Only if you're not going to drink it all."

I poured some into another glass and brought it to him.

I sat down on the edge of the bed, my back to him. My hands felt heavy. I looked at them in my lap, turned them over. Either way, they looked like they'd been put on backwards.

—Maybe I am a little drunk. Probably I should have kept my mouth shut.

I heard him pick up his glass, take a sip of water, put the glass back down.

We didn't say anything for a while. I didn't move. I felt like there was more distance between us than ever, or that I was more aware of it than

before. I thought maybe my own personal universe was expanding, and I wondered if it would just keep expanding and expanding until it was virtually empty, or if maybe one day, for reasons I couldn't anticipate at that point, it would start contracting, and this would turn out to have been a natural part of the ebb and flow that is spacetime itself. Or maybe it would keep on contracting, and eventually I'd implode.

It occurred to me that part of what I was feeling was a glimpse of what it was like to be Lawrence: his mind was full of stars exploding and collapsing in on themselves, the whole universe expanding faster every second, all the stars in it moving farther and farther away from us, taking its secrets with them, and he was chasing after them, trying to find a way to make sense of them.

We're all trying to figure out the same thing, each in our own language.

I was not, at that point, even considering having an affair. I just knew I wanted something—needed something—I was never going to get from Lawrence.

I got up to put on my nightgown.

Then I came back and got in bed next to him, turned off the lights, closed my eyes. We were lying there in the silence, and the galaxy kept swirling around its black hole and the earth kept orbiting the sun as it spun on its own axis, so it felt as if we weren't moving a muscle, when in fact we were flying through space at immeasurable speed.

After a while, I was in a completely different place.

Then he said, "I meant well," and I believed him. Which just made it worse.

"It's okay," I said, lying. "Forget it."