

Two Wives

by Daniel Harris

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Two women sat at a small round table near the sidewalk waiting for the same man. The older woman, older by only twenty-four hours, was tall and very skinny, almost anorexic. She wore a newsboy cap, which covered her thinning hair. She had big white teeth that were prominent when she laughed, which she did in a rather programmed way. She was wearing a work shirt, blue jeans and Brevitt boots, which complimented her shapely stems.

Her companion, her junior by twenty-four hours, was a raven-haired beauty with, as they say, good bones, and a hourglass figure. She wore a wide brimmed hat with feather and rhinestone decorations, which framed her perfect complexion and face. She was wearing her husband's tuxedo dress shirt and a Hermès scarf. She wore a long full skirt. They both would never see fifty again.

The man they were waiting for was a painter, Jack Mahler, who had been married to the elder woman for less than three years thirty-five years before. His current spouse of twenty-five years was the younger woman.

—Emma, said Bea the older of the two, you always are so classy. I love what you've done to your hat.

—You flatter me Bea. I always admire your sass. What woman, said Emma, would wear cowboy clothes to a New York City restaurant?

—When I was a successful artist in Santa Fe, said Bea, this was dinning attire. Upscale was when you flashed big antique turquoise jewelry

The waiter approached the table.

—May I bring you ladies a drink?

—Seltzer with lime for me, said, Bea, the elder woman.

—Is it OK if I drink, Bea? asked Emma. Or will it cause a problem?

—No, no problem. After twenty years at AA and a few relapses, I know the wages of drink. Don't forget I'm sleeping not twenty feet from Jack's liquor locker.

—He really should be more considerate. I told him to hide the booze.

—Don't worry about it. I'm under control, said Bea.

—I'll take your delicious raspberry martini, said Emma, to the waiter.

The waiter bowed and left.

—What are you going to do for a job? said Emma. You are not painting and you seem to spend most days just wandering the city.

—I'm trying to get my life together. I have over \$50,000 in credit card debt. My credit counselor is conferring with my art dealer to work out a pay down. The reason I don't paint is that every picture I make instantly goes to my creditors. I was selling paintings for five, ten thousand each. After taxes and my dealer's commission, I'd be lucky to clear a few thousand bucks.

—That doesn't seem right, said Emma. I think Jack knows people who can help you. He bitches about commissions, but he still turns good coin when he sells paintings.

—Yeah, but Jack is smart, very talented and clever in many ways.

—A clever drunk. He lost our Picasso drawings to some Mafioso thugs at a card game last year, said Emma.

—Jack can drink, but he's been pretty good since I've been staying with you, said Bea.

—I think he's trying to keep from going over the edge in your presence, said Emma.

The waiter brought their drinks and a plate of salty peanuts

Emma took a sip of her martini. Bea ignored her seltzer.

—Do you think you will find a job and some place to stay soon? asked Emma. It really is a strain on our marriage for you to stay at our apartment, as large as it is.

—Emma, believe me, I want to get out as much as you want me to leave. I know how uncomfortable it can be. I had a girlfriend who crashed with me for six months. I finally had to sleep with her boyfriend to get her to move out.

—I hope you're not sleeping with Jack, said Emma, giving Bea a close look.

—No way, said Bea. Sleeping with an ex is like incest. I've been down that road. It never works out.

—Jack says everyone in your family is crazy, said Emma.

—Not me, or, if I am, I'm the least crazy, said Bea laughing.

The two women surveyed the street and the restaurant.

—I like that outfit, said Emma, watching a girl in a short classy sundress with deep décolletage flounce by their table.

—Not for us fifty-somethings, but nice on her, said Bea. We'd need a good uplift bra.

—Well, with my piano legs, it's long skirts for me, said Emma. Plus I hate bras.

—I don't have much to lift anyway, said Bea. Besides, I don't need men who are babies looking for a big wet bosom, replied Bea.

—I never had a bosom until I gained weight. I hate it. Men just stare at my chest. They use to look at my face, said Emma.

—Well, that's better than them grabbing your buns like they do me, said Bea

The women scanned the restaurant for who knows what: beautiful women, handsome men, possible love?

—Was Jack ever a mean drunk with you? asked Emma.

Bea looked around and thought about her answer.

—I don't know if it was meanness, said Bea, just frustration. I was such an ungrateful wife. He was working sixteen hours or more a day and I was bored. I fell in with an avant-garde theater crowd and began doing a lot of drinking, drugs and sex. I was arrested twice for indecent exposure. It was a sixties thing. He'd come home and I wouldn't be there, sometimes not for a couple of days. He'd get drunk and once after one of my infidelities, he slapped me.

—He's a difficult man, especially when he drinks. Even when he's not drinking, he's too intense. He makes me cry a couple times a week, said Emma.

—Only lately have I realized that there was a problem of cultural disconnect. He expected a dutiful wife who would cook and clean. Maybe even make babies. It just wasn't my scene. Probably not his either, but that's where he came from, so that's what he expected.

—He's changed. He has no interest in family or a subservient wife. Obviously he doesn't harbor any animus, or he wouldn't have let you stay with us, said Emma.

—I did leave him in the lurch. When he went to Frankfurt for his first solo show, I sold everything I could and took off with the car. When he came home, there was no apartment and all his stuff was gone except for what was stashed in his studio

—Some days he makes me so mad, said Emma. I want to leave like you did. You were so strong. I don't have that confidence.

—Well, I don't know about strong. It was over, so one of us had to make a move. His leaving for three weeks was the opening I needed.

—You know my mother said that most men were only good for three weeks. Some days I know she was right, said Emma.

—I'm certainly not thinking about marriage or even about a relationship, said Bea. I've got my health and freedom. What more could a girl want? Certainly not three weeks with a loser.

Emma spotted a neighbor, Portia, escorted by a handsome elderly man take a table not far away

—Don't look now, Bea, but I think that is the woman Jack is seeing on the side.

—Which one? The brunette with the Renoir hair?

—Yes, said Emma. Her name is Portia Biscotti, like the Italian pastry.

—Men drool for those women. Sophisticated, charming, cultured and very independent. She's a gold digger for sure. Do you know the man she's with? asked Bea.

—No, but I've seen his picture in the paper, so he must be someone important, replied Emma. She's divorced and probably got

a million in alimony plus the big brownstone down the street from us. She's set for life.

—I wouldn't be worried. Unattached women like that have lots of male friends. They use the hope of a hook-up as bait to get those groveling men to do chores and favors for them. I call them "troops."

—Well, Jack has been at her house fixing plumbing and painting. We take care of her dog when she travels.

—I wouldn't worry; Jack doesn't exhibit the attitudes of an unfaithful husband, pronounced Bea. Besides, she'd be too worried about her make-up or hair getting ruined with a ravisher like Jack.

Emma blushed. It sounded like Bea was talking about her. Emma was vain and protective of her perfect skin and spent lavish time on her appearance. She didn't like Jack or anyone messing it up. Possibly, just possibly, Emma mused, Jack *could be* having an affair with Portia. He was a good catch, even if he was an utter jerk when blotto.

—Where is that husband of yours? asked Bea. He said he would be here at five.

—I'm getting hungry. He better show up soon or we'll order dinner. Imagine, he told me; *you* were the one who was always late.

—But this time, I'm with you, said Bea.

Both women finished their drinks and tried not to look at Portia, yet watched her out of the corner of their eyes.

—Is that Jack across the street at the flower stand? asked Bea.

—Looks like him, said Emma. Look he's buying flowers.

—He was always generous like that, said Bea.

Jack jaywalked across Broadway and went directly to the table where Portia and her companion were seated

—Hello, Portia, said Jack.

Her companion stood up.

—I'm Jack, said Jack introducing himself to the man. I'm a neighbor of Portia's.

—This is Ashford Garth Williams, an old friend of my ex-husband's, said Portia blushing at Jack's sudden appearance. He's a billionaire.

—My friends call me Ash, said Mr. Williams. I think Portia overstates the case. I'm actually a nice guy.

—Pleased to meet you, Williams. You should buy my paintings, very good investments. If you had bought one of my paintings thirty years ago for two thousand bucks, it'd be worth about \$200,000 today. Sorry you missed the opportunity. But as they say, past performance is no guarantee of future returns.

—Jack, stop being obnoxious, scolded Portia. She could tell he had been drinking, or had a very good day at the studio.

Williams sensed an easy give and take between Jack and Portia that went beyond friendship between the two. Experience told him they were long-term lovers.

—How long...began Williams

—You look terrific Portia, said Jack, talking over Williams.

Jack pulled the prettiest rose from the bouquet, took a large switchblade from his pocket, cut the stem, and gently put the flower in the lowest point of the neckline of Portia's dress.

—Jack! said Portia, startled by Jack's bold move.

—I see my ex-wife and current wife a few tables away. I better be civil

He leaned down and pulled Portia to him giving her a full deep kiss on the mouth.

—You're going to pay for that, said Portia laughing theatrically. Portia then waved to Jack's wife. Emma observed the scene with dropped jaw horror.

Jack braced himself for recriminations and hectoring from the tribe of wives. History would be served with fire and ice I better not drink, he said to himself. A good day in the studio isn't worth a family fight.

