

## FIRST VISIT

And Tim did too, speaking to me about that moment for the first time, terrified. I stared at him, fixating on his eyes until he blurred in front of me and became the boy he used to be.



THE CHATTAHOOCHEE REVIEW

*Exporting the South. Importing the World.*

*Winner of the Lamar York Prize for Fiction*

Carol LaHines

## PAPIJACK

The woman he was living with had a Papillon about to give birth. The father was a Jack Russell terrier. The pups would be *Papijacks*. Not purebreds, not exactly, but not mongrels. Designer hybrids.

He told Jake about the puppies. He hadn't meant to, but the boy was asking questions about the dog's condition. The boy wondered why the dog's abdomen was swollen, why she'd grown sluggish. He noticed the prominent teats. The man had to explain about birth, and weaning, and blind dependence on resources.

"Can I have one?" the boy asked.

"Sure," he replied. He hadn't bothered asking the boy's mother. She would complain about his *lack of consideration*. But she would acquiesce, as she'd always acquiesced. Buy the dog a plush bed, ensure that it had squeaky toys and plenty of treats. Savory morsels. See to it that it had been immunized against whatever afflicted city dogs. Heartworm, ringworm, clever and insidious parasites. She was incapable of disappointing the boy. He'd done that enough already.

The boy told everyone he was getting a puppy. He told the neighbors that soon he'd be getting a puppy of his own. He told his teacher. He told his friends, children with Labradors and French bulldogs, children whose fathers still lived among them, at least purporting to be responsible.

The boy intended to name the puppy Fiona. The name of princesses who metamorphosed into ogres. The name of melancholic Irish singers.

"What if it's a boy?" the man asked.

"It's going to be a girl," the boy insisted.

The ex-wife warned him not to disappoint the boy, reflexively alluding to incidents from their shared past from which one might deduce that he had not been the best husband, the best father.

"Do we always have to go back there?" he pleaded. His ex-wife insisted on rehashing the past, to try to make sense of it. She and the boy were seeing a therapist, someone who evaluated their interactions and read their emails and was able to tell her when she was being manipulated, or lapsing into engrained negative habits. Someone to affirm that she had done the right thing in taking the boy, leaving the man to fend for himself.

"I just want to make sure you understand," she said.

"I understand," he said. "See you next weekend."

They had been separated for two years. Enough distance for the ex-wife to have acquired perspective on their marriage. For her to have formed certain opinions regarding the intractability of his character and his flair for bad behavior. For her to circumscribe his relationship with the boy, relegating him to every other weekend and Father's Day.

The woman he was living with was not the one he'd been sleeping with when the marriage imploded. That woman had fallen by the wayside. She didn't want to be responsible for the dissolution of someone's marriage. She didn't want to assume the mantle of *stepmother*. It was one thing to fool around, another to take on the onus of *homewrecker*, with all of its sundry negative overtones. She'd only wanted to have fun, copacetic talk with a kindred soul. She called whenever the new boyfriend was getting on her nerves but had been clear about her delimited role. *Don't expect anything from me*, a life aphorism if ever he'd heard one.

He had met the current woman online. She'd never married, never had children, hadn't cluttered her life with dependents and obligations and insufferable exigencies. She was a dancer, or had been a dancer, but she'd been afflicted with heel spurs. Ten years his senior, with an air of lonely dissipation. She was ripe for him. He had sensed it immediately. He vibrated in tune to others' frailties. The ex-wife asked *what are you doing with her?*, sighing and shaking her head, having acquired certain insights into his psyche in the

aftermath of their separation.

The Papijacks were born toward the end of May. There were six of them. Three girls and three boys. The mom licked them off and sprawled out so they could obtain their nourishment. He texted a photo of the puppies to his son. *They're here!*

Some were tan and white like the father; some long-haired, like the mother.

The boy said he wanted the black and brown one.

"She's yours," he texted back.

"When can I bring her home?" he asked.

"Not until it's weaned, okay?"

The boy was nine. There was still time to alter the boy's opinions of him, to counter the impression that he was feckless and insufficiently concerned. Time to convince him that he wasn't the bad guy. In another year or two, it would be too late. In another year or two, he would be *persona non grata*, someone the boy had lived with for a short period, a passing grace note.

The boy's pup was gaining weight. She opened her eyes, looked around. Still unable to see more than inches in front of her. At this stage, she needed only to latch on and to suck. No other *raison d'être*. She existed only as a formless want. A blind and lumpen ball of fur.

The woman he was living with began to expect certain things from him. She expected him to return home promptly after work and to contribute to the household expenses. She expected him to respond when texted. There was a *quid pro quo*, a tacit agreement.

"I think it's only fair that you pay \$2,000 a month. That'll cover your part of the rent and utilities, as well as something for groceries." He was there more than she was. Enjoying the view of Central Park, expecting the staff to do his bidding.

They were sitting on the futon. The one she had draped with Burmese and Nepalese textiles from her travels. When she squinted, the lines coalesced around her eyes.

"Fine," he said. He did not like to argue with women. He did what he wanted to do anyway. They would figure it out, eventually. Some took longer

than others, blindsided by their unfounded expectations.

The other woman—the one he'd been sleeping with when the marriage imploded—called. She told him she still thought about him. She missed their sexual spark, the simpatico rhythm of their bodies. *Would it be bad to explore our connection?* she posited. He took it as a rhetorical question. She had what in the psychological lexicon was called a sexual addiction. She thrived on novel and tumultuous experiences.

They met at her apartment on East Fourth Street. A fourth-floor walk-up with a fire escape. Her boyfriend was out of town at a film festival. He was a director, or an assistant director, in any event someone integrally connected to the making of a documentary on the whirling dervishes of Mevlevi.

They fell into bed quickly, having already seduced and discarded one another. They lay naked a while afterward. They shared a joint and drank a bottle of Chablis, unconcerned about the hour or their respective commitments or anything other than reveling in each other's bodies. The shadows fell across the parquet floor. As if there to adumbrate something.

The boy visited him that weekend. He played with the papijacks, enticing them with strings and phantom prey. He cradled Fiona in his hands. "When can I bring her home?" he asked.

"When she's weaned, like I said."

"It's taking soooooo long," he complained.

He made the boy pancakes. The boy didn't say much. He wasn't animated save when talking about video games or the puppy. There were already distances between them. Subjects they avoided, deft non sequiturs. The boy avoided mentioning his mother or her new boyfriend. Avoided alluding to the life before. The one now relegated to memory, flash points, residue to be processed in a therapeutic context.

"Patience," he said, flipping the pancakes and setting the plate before him. "They should be weaned in another couple of weeks."

The woman he was living with found a text from the woman he was sleeping with. *How long until you can make it back, lover?* She wanted to make love on the rooftop, on the fire escape as the rain pattered down. She wanted to feel him inside her, epically, apocryphally, pausing only for a cigarette. She

was poetic, if mentally unbalanced. Unable to circumscribe her passions in a socially appropriate way, or at least to have the requisite amount of discretion.

The woman he was living with called him *a liar* and *a cheat*. She accused him of avoiding responsibility. Of being a *bohemian*, of all things. Of caring about no one but himself. Of using an inordinate amount of household resources. Stripping the toilet paper, depleting the mineral water. She wanted him to *get out*. She packed his bag, the few belongings he had scattered in closets or drawers. The rest of his things were still in storage, where the ex-wife had evacuated them after evicting him from the home. It was a theme with limited variation. The recursion almost a relief.

The pups whelped. They were frolicking with one another, jumping on the sofa, awakened by the animated conversation. The woman sighed and gathered up the soiled newspapers.

He thought to murmur an apology, but it would only be construed as insincere. He grabbed the bag and took his leave.

He had nowhere to go, so he returned to the other woman. She was excited to see him at first but sighed when she learned of his recent circumstances. Dragged on an unfiltered cigarette, indifferent to the graphic photos of cancerous and withered lungs on the box. Swirled a glass of Beaujolais. Considering whether to make an exception for his pathetic and haggard soul. "It's not like that," she said finally. "You can stay the night, but you should go in the morning."

The ex-wife asked him about his *current living situation*. Apropos of informing him that she didn't think it advisable for the boy—he who had already witnessed so much torn asunder—to be exposed to further tumult. To form unwholesome conclusions about the sustainability of relationships, the capacity of the male partner to honor his commitments.

"I should have a place soon," he said, interrupting her condemnations. In the last two years, she had learned to express her opinions forthrightly. She had submitted to self-scrutiny. She recognized the emotional loopholes he'd been perceptive enough to exploit. Self-abnegation. A laudable need to take responsibility for everyone and everything. He was psychologically astute, if altogether abysmal in other ways.

"What does that mean?" she asked, before correcting herself. "Never mind. Let me know when you've settled somewhere." It was important for

the boy to have stability, a sense that things were held together, not random particles spilling across a field. "Just remember to call Jake."

The boy visited him at his new apartment on the far west side of Manhattan. It was in a part of town still under construction, proximate to the rail yards. They were extending the High Line northward, revitalizing the area.

He lived on the fifth floor of a tenement walk-up. A hold-out from the old neighborhood.

"Do you like the view?" he asked. The boy gazed at the Hudson.

"It's nice," the boy conceded.

"They're building a sports complex over there," he pointed. "A big multiplex. We'll be able to see lots of movies." He stared at the construction pits in the ground, the land agape. The latticework of the underside visible. The rubble underlying the city.

He brought the boy to the field, tossed a ball back and forth. The boy was not the most coordinated. They hadn't spent much time out on the field when he was younger, pitching back and forth, anticipating the grab, the internalized physics of the game. He'd never developed the eye-hand coordination, the feel for the trajectory of a ball.

They returned to the apartment after dusk. The five floors—the last a crumbling passage—left the boy winded. He was not in the best of shape. He spent more time indoors, engaged in simulated combat and triumphing over virtual demons. "It's too far!" he complained.

They sat on the futon, eating leftover lo mein. The sun retreating, the Hudson rippling in black.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" the man inquired. The boy was still interested in superheroes, at least for now, avengers and masked vigilantes.

"Maybe," he equivocated.

"Who's your favorite superhero?" he asked.

The boy shrugged.

"What about Captain America? Do you like him?"

"Not really."

"Spider Man?"

The boy paused. "He's okay, I guess."

"Just okay?" The backstory involved orphanhood and a radioactive spider. A girl smitten with the hero but not his real-world counterpart.

"I don't really have a favorite superhero," the boy conceded, staring ahead. "Dad?" he asked.

"Ummm."

"The puppy's not coming home, is it?" The boy had already divined the meaning of certain signs. The encrusted patterns. The trenchant residue.

The man swallowed hard the words he could not say.

