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**The Surrogate**

By [Tessa Hadley](https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/tessa-hadley)

When I was twenty, I fell in love with one of the lecturers at my college. I know that this is a very ordinary thing to do. And I know now that lecturers, when they notice yet another smitten girl-child traipsing moonily around after them, simply sigh and feel anxious. They feel anxious and all the other things you would expect, too: flattered and confirmed and a little bit stimulated.

His name was Patrick Hammett, and he taught courses on Shakespeare, seventeenth-century poetry, and critical theory. I took all his classes; I made him my interpreter of the whole world. Patrick was tall, with rather bowed shoulders; he was hollowly thin except for a small soft beer belly nestled in the stretched cloth of his T-shirt above his belt. He wore his thick black hair down to his shoulders, tucked behind his ears. He used gold-rimmed glasses to read but took them off when he was talking, swung them in his fingers, and sometimes dropped them; without the glasses, his eyes were deep-set and squinted slightly. In a crowd, in a club, you wouldn’t have picked him out as particularly good-looking. But in the lecture room, sitting with us in the democratic circle of chairs that he insisted upon, his looks were a power, a force that I felt physically, like velvet against my skin. I loved the whitened pressure points that his glasses left on the bridge of his thin crooked nose. I loved the big nervous hands he was always waving in the air, gesturing uncontrollably as he spoke.

Of course I didn’t have a chance with him. Who was I? I wasn’t anybody. I wasn’t even one of the cleverest students in his classes. I wasn’t an absolutely average student, either; I was aware that I had a quirky way of seeing things, which sometimes came out as insight and sometimes just left everyone looking blank. Patrick encouraged me. Once, he reminded the class of something I’d said. “You remember the point that Carla made in last week’s seminar?” Another time, after I’d made some remark about freedom of choice in “Much Ado About Nothing,” he said, “That’s very well expressed, Carla. I couldn’t have put that more eloquently myself.” This made me very happy. But I didn’t delude myself. I wasn’t the kind of student who would get a first-class mark. When I tried to put my thoughts down in writing, the dart of intuition that had been clear and sharp when it flew into my mind got tangled in something muffling and clumsy. And Patrick’s occasional surprise at my penetration didn’t mean that he had singled me out. I didn’t really exist for him outside that circle of chairs in the lecture room.

In his seventeenth-century-poetry seminar he read us “The Exequy,” by Henry King:

Dear loss! Since thy untimely fate

My task hath been to meditate

On thee, on thee: thou art the book,

The library whereon I look

Though almost blind. . . .

’Tis true, with shame and grief I yield,

Thou like the *Vann* first took’st the field,

And gotten hast the victory

In this adventuring to dy

Before me, whose more years might crave

A just precedence in the grave.

But heark! My Pulse like a soft Drum

Beats my approach, tells *Thee* I come;

And slow howere my marches be,

I shall at last sit down by *Thee*.

I can’t adequately express the effect this poem had on me then. I don’t remember now what season of the year it was, but I do remember that the fluorescent lights in the lecture room were on in the middle of the day because the sky was so dark outside, navy-blue clouds pressing close to the earth like an artificial ceiling. Little gouts of rain were spitting against the window, and in the gently sloping field outside (the campus was built up around an eighteenth-century house on an estate farmed by the Duchy of Cornwall) the bullocks, instead of lying down as they should have done with rain coming, were jostling uneasily and heaving up against the fence and clambering onto one another’s backs.

When I look at the poem now, I see that it is the lament of a much older man for a young wife snatched away by death, and that it depends upon a confidence in the resurrection of the body on Judgment Day. I don’t know anything about those things. But at the time I felt that the words of the poem were so immediate and relevant that they spoke to me not just through my mind but through my body. I could hear that Drum; its beating came right up out of the floor of the classroom and shook me through the soles of my feet.

I made one of those remarks that didn’t come out well, and nobody took much notice of it. “He longs for her and she isn’t there,” I said. It sounded too obvious to need stating. I’d wanted to use the word “sexual” (we were trained to see sexual implications everywhere, and surely in this case I would have been right), but I couldn’t bring myself to be the first to say it. Patrick wanted us to talk about the metaphor of the beloved object as text (“thou art the book, / The library whereon I look”). For me, the text was Patrick. All the passion, the concentration of the poem I attributed to him. It became my intimation of the pulse of his life, from which I was shut out.

He was only six or seven years older than we were, but his life seemed to be made of different stuff than the lives I was familiar with. As far as I knew, he wasn’t married or living with anyone. Someone said that he’d once had a relationship with a student, although this was against the rules. That didn’t make me any more hopeful. She had probably been one of the clever ones. She had probably been beautiful. I didn’t think I was. My looks—I was small and blond with eyes that made the kids at school call me Frogface—were like the quirky things I said in class. Good on a good day.

I dreamed about him all the time. I don’t mean sleeping dreams, although sometimes he was in those as well. Too many of my waking hours were spent fantasizing scenes in which Patrick and I somehow met outside the classroom and our relationship developed out of distant acquaintance into passionate amour. I was very exacting as the author and director of these scenes. Nothing could happen in them that was absurdly improbable or out of character. Patrick was never allowed, for example, to tell me that he had always loved me, that he had been fascinated by me from the moment I first walked into the lecture room. The scene could begin with no more than his friendly appreciation of an interested student, a teacherly investment in my intellectual development. He might at most be allowed a little stir of vanity at the depth and earnestness of my response to him.

Still, even given these constraints, the journey from the plausible encounter to the moment when he reached out for me could be travelled in a thousand different ways. (Even in my fantasies I didn’t dare reach out for him, in case he turned me down.) He had to be surprised out of his position of friendly neutrality and into a dawning, uneasy recognition of his growing attraction to me, an attraction that he perhaps couldn’t quite rationally account for. The transformation could be precipitated in various ways; these were the only extravagance I allowed myself. Sometimes we would be accidentally stranded by a breakdown in the middle of nowhere, after he’d innocently offered me a ride home from college. Or we’d be caught by a freak storm when stopping by the cottage of a friend of his to pick up some books. Or he would have to take refuge in my room one night after being beaten up by muggers and left bleeding in the road just as I was on my way home.

But my favorite scene took place somewhere I don’t think I’ve ever actually been. I imagined a path through a green meadow. I needed to be clear in my mind about exactly how we’d got there. Sometimes it was in the aftermath of another encounter nearer home. (“Why don’t you come for a walk next weekend, and I’ll show you where Coleridge is supposed to have started writing ‘The Ancient Mariner’?”) Or a whole group of us had been out on a college field trip and Patrick and I, while talking, had got separated from the rest. (This was tricky to imagine, since the only trip he ever came on was to the theatre at Stratford.) Or he had employed me to do some research over the holidays and then on impulse said he’d like to buy me tea in the country as a reward.

We’d walk down the grassy path until we reached a gate, which opened into a wood beyond. At the threshold of the wood the light changed from broad sunshine to a secretive and dappled shade. There were rustlings among the fallen leaves that were spread like a carpet under the trees. It was a place I’d invented for a transition, for the passage over from my life to his, from his to mine. The gate was made of old gray wood washed silvery by the rain; it swung crookedly on rusting hinges. He held it open for me, or I climbed over it and he helped me down. Something in the change of light stilled us, made us pause; the wood with its pillarlike tree trunks and its tracery of branches was a cathedral. He was still supporting my weight, or I was cast up against him in some way as I came through the gate or passed him on the narrow path. I could feel the heat of his body under the ragged gray wool of the sweater he often wore.

I could only really sustain the stories up to this point. After that, his face came closer, he put his arms around me, there was kissing, there was a pressing together, and the narrative failed—it lost its sequence. I could—and did—imagine plenty of what happened after, but not in any clear way. It came in a hallucinated muddle that I would try to disentangle. I’d return again and again to the gate, the threshold, the movement with which he reached across the distance between us. I’d start again from there. But it was never any good. The dream beyond that point was a loop of film repeating itself. Exhausting, after a while. Dispiriting. Because in truth it was nothing at all.

In my second year I was so short of money that I got a job working three evenings a week at a pub in town. It must have been an old pub once, with lots of twisty little rooms winding around the different levels, but the walls had been knocked down and it was now one huge, cavernous space, low-ceilinged and gloomy. There were still confusing steps up and down in places, and the floor changed from flagstone to wood to carpet; drunks and women in heels sometimes tripped and spilled their beer. Video games flashing ruby- and emerald-colored lights stood against the walls. The place didn’t have much atmosphere. It was more fashionable to go to one of the new bars with long pine tables and stainless-steel counters, where food was served; or to one of the quaint old pubs that had kept their little rooms and served real ale. Big parties came to my pub because there was usually room to seat them. And men came in, to watch football on the TV screens, the kind of men who didn’t want roasted vegetables in pitas or real ale.

I’d worked in nicer pubs. When I lived at home I’d worked in our local, where the old-timers expected you to start pulling their pints the moment they pushed open the door. I didn’t mind the anonymity of this place. I was often on with temporary staff I didn’t know, and that meant I didn’t have to talk too much. If we weren’t busy, I just kept order behind the bar. I made sure that the glasses were clean, the lemons sliced, the drip trays emptied, the bottles in the optics replaced as soon as they ran out, the ice bucket filled.

While I was taking care of all this I forgot that I was a student. I rarely saw anyone from the college in there, students or staff. But one night, when I came back from asking the landlord to change a barrel, I thought for a moment that I saw Patrick. A man with the same long narrow build and thick shoulder-length hair was standing with his back to the bar, a pint of lager in one hand, looking up at the TV screen. Although this was exactly the sort of plausible scenario I was always dreaming up to bring us together, in reality I didn’t want it to be him. I panicked. I didn’t think I could cope with my two roles at once—competent barmaid and besotted student—and I had no idea how to respond when he turned around and recognized me. But the bloke, when he turned around, wasn’t Patrick, though he did look rather like him. Rather like him but quite different. He had the same crooked nose—more exaggerated, even—and the same close-set eyes that were revealed when Patrick took his glasses off. But he didn’t wear glasses. He didn’t have any of Patrick’s concentrated excitement.

When he asked for a pint of Stella, his accent was ordinary, not like Patrick’s educated one. When I smiled at him and made some comment about the football match, he blushed, and I guessed that he was shy, and maybe not very clever. He probably would have liked to keep the conversation going, but he couldn’t think of what to say to me. And I got a certain pleasure out of the situation. I could play at talking to Patrick, without its really mattering. I made small talk as I handed the man his change and stayed with him until I was called away to serve someone else. When he left the pub, fifteen minutes later, he put his glass on the bar and said goodbye to me in such a way that I knew he’d planned it in advance, hoping that I’d be looking in his direction.

Then I forgot all about him. I didn’t expect to see him again. But a week later he was back, and after that it was a regular thing. He came with his friends, and I think he would have come regardless of me—they were just a gang who met up often and were going through a phase of drinking in this particular pub—but he did remember me, and looked for me when he came in the door, and blushed if I served him. When his friends saw us chatting together they teased him. They made him go to the bar for every round, and then they whistled and laughed to encourage him.

“Go on, ask her,” they said, meaning me to hear.

“Fuck off,” he said, red-faced, pretending to be busy with the first mouthful of his pint.

Every time I saw him I’d feel the same shock at his likeness to Patrick. People come in physical types; I’ve seen girls I immediately recognized as belonging to the same type as me: small and round with these deep-lidded frog eyes. There are dark ones and blond ones, but the type is as unmistakable as if we belonged to the same subspecies. And, even though there were specific points on which they didn’t match, this man and Patrick had the same overall effect. The man in the pub was blurred where Patrick was definite. His skin was coarser. His hair wasn’t as black and straight—it was dark brown, with honey-brown curling bits in it. He was a little shorter than Patrick, but more muscular, as if he did physical work. He told me that he was a gas engineer, which wasn’t all that physical, but presumably more strenuous than lecturing on the literature of the Early Modern period. He had a little beer belly like Patrick’s. His jeans hung on his narrow hips in the same way. Actually—oddly, considering how unalike their lives and personalities were—they even dressed the same. They wore tight V-necked sweaters over jeans, without a shirt. They wore black T-shirts with those little cap sleeves. I suppose they had both found the styles that suited them.

And soon something began that I’m shocked to think of now. Something that I initiated. It would never have occurred to him even to speak to me, beyond ordering his drinks, if I hadn’t started it. I didn’t just flirt with him. I went all out to make things go further. I knew that this was supposed to be a risky and demeaning strategy for a girl; it certainly wasn’t something I’d ever done before. But with him I was safe because it didn’t matter. It honestly wouldn’t have mattered to me if he’d stopped coming to the pub and I’d never seen him again. So it could do no harm to play my game.

If I wasn’t busy I’d watch him from my vantage point behind the bar. Sooner or later he’d become aware of this and look up from where he stood or sat with his mates, and then I’d smile at him, a long heated-up smile, and he would redden and look away again, smiling, too. When he came to the bar I rushed to serve him, even if one of the other barmaids was closer. He bought me drinks, and I clinked glasses with him and asked him about himself. When I gave him his change I made sure that our hands touched. I don’t think that anything like this had happened to him before. He wasn’t a complete innocent. (I found out that he’d been engaged to someone and she had broken up with him a few months before.) But he wasn’t used to being pursued by a stranger.

The shock of his looking so much like Patrick never completely left me. On the one hand, I felt I had the measure of the man he was—pleasant and rather dull. I knew that he and his friends spent the evening talking about cars and football and teased each other in the explosive foot-shuffling, flaring-up way I remembered from the boys at school; from time to time, they’d run out of things to say to one another and sit in silence, taking mouthfuls of their beer. On the other hand, his appearance flashed a promise to me; it was as if Patrick’s qualities were locked up inside him somewhere, if only I could find the key to release them.

Eventually I got him to the point where he couldn’t help but ask me if he could give me a lift home from work. I felt embarrassed then, as if my game had gone too far. He waited for me while we cleared up, and reassured me that he’d had only one pint and was all right to drive, and then he led me proudly around the corner to his car, which looked very shiny under the street lamps. I hoped that he hadn’t cleaned it for my benefit. I think he felt more confident about his car than about himself, but the impression was wasted on me—I couldn’t tell one type of car from another. While he was driving me to the house I shared with some other students, we both went shy. I nervously asked him about his work, and he told me that he had worked for British Gas for several years and then set up his own business with a friend. For tax reasons, they’d recently had to split the business in two, one side dealing with boilers and central-heating systems and the other with gas appliances, although in effect they still worked together. He explained this to me in some detail, and I was bored. I was hoping that none of my housemates would be around when I asked him in for coffee, and they weren’t.

It was always better when he wasn’t talking. When he was silent I could recover the illusion I was pursuing. I barely talked to him about myself—about college, about my classes, about my plans. I barely talked to him at all. I turned on my lamp, which had a pink bulb, so that the room was dim. I kissed him, I touched him, I undid his clothes, I made all the first moves. I don’t think he was quite comfortable with the speed at which these things happened. He was a nice chap—he would have preferred to take things slowly. He would have preferred to have me as his proper girlfriend. On the other hand, he was a man; he didn’t turn me down. Perhaps he felt a little ashamed of himself afterward. Or ashamed of me, more likely. I don’t remember him staying long in my room, I don’t remember watching him while he dressed to go home. I think he shared a flat with his brother and another bloke, but I never went there.

We didn’t “go out” together. We only ever did one thing together. For a couple of months, before I quit my job at the pub and went home for the summer, we did that every week. Of course I was pretending the whole time that I was with Patrick, that it was Patrick who was making love to me. Only the pretense was never complete. Even in the dim light from the pink bulb, even if I half closed my eyes and didn’t look directly at him, even when I was mixing together in my mind the physical reality of our bodies grappling and one of my stories about Patrick, the knowledge that he wasn’t Patrick seeped irresistibly in. This wasn’t the real thing. It was only a secondhand enactment of love.

I have forgotten to give his name. His name was Dave.

Only a few years have passed, but a lot has happened since then. These are the years when a lot happens, when your life lurches across crucial transitions like a train hurtling across points at speed. It doesn’t always feel that way at the time. At the time, you sometimes feel that life has slowed down to a point of frozen stillness. There’s no tedium like the tedium of twenty. But all the while you are in fact flying fast into a future that has already been decided by a couple of accidental encounters or scraps of dreams.

In the end, Patrick Hammett reached out for me. Unbelievably, what he actually said when he did it was that he had always loved me, he had been fascinated by me from the moment I first walked into the lecture room. Or words to that effect. Which just goes to show that you mustn’t trust a scrupulous realism, that sometimes sloppy fantasy comes closer to the true state of things. I became the person it had been unimaginable for me to be: Patrick’s girlfriend, Patrick’s wife. We had to wait until I had finished his classes before we could tell anyone about this, and those months were the most wonderful months, the secret months, when I had to sit in his classroom and engage in discussion as usual, as if there were nothing going on between us.

I love Patrick. I think we’re well matched. But of course I’m not infatuated with him anymore. You can’t go on being infatuated with someone you share toothpaste with, whose crusty inside-out balls of socks you have to put in the washing machine. I still count on his intelligence and his articulate way of speaking. But I get irritated at the way he gulps in a breath of air just before he pours out some hoarded-up information, and at the way he guides conversations around to an opportunity for him to be surprised at someone else’s ignorance. When he’s holding forth in an argument he fills any gaps while he searches for words with a loud “um,” so that no one else has a chance to break in with a different point of view.

I never told Patrick about Dave. And I’ve never seen him since. I once looked up gas engineers in the Yellow Pages and found a company that might have been his. I couldn’t look him up in the residential phone book because I never knew his last name. In my first few months with Patrick, if I ever thought about Dave I was just embarrassed at what I’d done. But then the idea of him began to preoccupy me, like an unsolved mystery. Why had he lent himself so unquestioningly, so pliably, to my fantasy? How could he have explained to himself what was happening between us? I try to remember the details of our lovemaking and I can’t. I can hardly believe that we were pressed naked against each other again and again. I feel as if I had wasted an opportunity, longing the whole time for him to be someone else. What was he feeling when he didn’t speak?

There’s no real equivalence between my situation now and my situation then. I’m happily married to Patrick and given the chance would not even seriously consider throwing in my luck with a stranger I have nothing in common with. That little hunger for a lost chance gets expressed only in my fantasies, which contrive themselves almost in spite of me. No green lane, no gate into a wood. He is a gas engineer in the fantasy, of course. He comes to my house to mend the boiler. At first we pretend not to recognize each other. I show him the problem and hover discreetly while he works. He asks me to hand him a spanner from his toolbox, and when he takes it from me he touches my hand with his.

I wish he weren’t a gas engineer. It sounds too much like a scenario from one of those funny pornographic films of the sixties, where the milkman or the postman is served up to the bored housewife amid all the conveniences of her own kitchen. But I’ve tried giving him another profession and I simply don’t believe it—it has no connection with the real man.

When he stands up to tell me that there’s a problem with the boiler’s valve, he steps toward me and begins to kiss me. It’s then that I see that what we did together has had consequences, for him. It has made him rather reckless, sexually. He has learned the audacity to reach across, through all the mess we make with thinking and talking, through to the body and the body’s truth.

I have to be careful not to believe in this. It is only a dream. ♦

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[Tessa Hadley](https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/tessa-hadley) has contributed short stories to The New Yorker since 2002. Her most recent novel is “[Late in the Day](https://www.amazon.com/Late-Day-Novel-Tessa-Hadley/dp/0062476696?ots=1&slotNum=0&imprToken=40bc2278-cf0c-ccf1-d6b&tag=thneyo0f-20&linkCode=w50).”

Začátek formuláře

Konec formuláře