

TWO SECRETS

Norbert Kovacs

The husband pursues several hobbies and a law career. He tries to act the intellectual but has difficulty reflecting on books. He focuses a lot on himself. His wife dotes on decorating and good clothes. She believes in connecting with her women friends. She likes to think they appreciate the subtleties of social life better than men.

The husband and the wife lead lives apart. The two walk by each other in the kitchen and the bathroom without speaking as they prepare for work. The wife returns home much earlier than the man; she makes and finishes dinner and settles on the couch to watch TV. The husband returns, eats, and resumes his casework, his "homework", in his study. He tries like this to get ahead. He is addicted to it. He will work and not leave the study. The woman will go on watching TV and forget him. When she tires of watching, she calls her friend on her smart phone. She talks as the TV runs, distracting her. Later, the man will emerge and join her on the couch where he will pick up a magazine to read. The two will talk some before she goes upstairs alone. She reads a magazine in bed for quarter of an hour before lying down to sleep. Downstairs, the husband will watch TV engrossed for hours. He will go to bed long after his wife.

The wife no longer enjoys living like this. She feels she will cry before the TV that she thought she liked. Her husband will not join her at the couch until very late though she asks he come earlier. She decides to find a lover. She gets an app for her phone to connect with men interested in adultery. She visits their profiles while her husband is in the other room at his homework. She writes men hoping to interest them. She connects with one and sees him on her day off. The husband slogs on with his casework at nights. He tires of it and believes his wife no good an alternative. He improves his mood by popping pills that he gets over the counter.

The wife cuts from work often to see her lover. She makes excuses to her boss that she must visit the doctor. She races out the door, happy to go. She makes two supposed doctor's visits each week. Her boss becomes suspicious and asks if her health is okay. She says she has a medical issue she rather would not discuss. She likes telling this lie to his face. When she sees her lover, she abandons her restraint. She laughs, jostling against his naked body.

The husband takes pills nightly in his study with the door closed. He feels happy, energized on them. He thinks at these times he does not need his wife or anyone else. Acting the intellectual again, he puts aside his books and dreams up theories of law based on his reading. He glows, believing these rants true. Then his mood crashes and he cannot believe he thought what he had. He realizes he had been excited. However, he loves the confidence and energy of his highs. He thinks he should try to re-discover the truths he had thought earlier when he takes the pills again.

The wife enjoys her friendships with other women more. She invites over her friends

Patti and Jen for lunch some weekends. In good weather, the three eat on the deck. The wife always has something to say about their office and her husband. She smiles at Patti and commends her hair even as she thinks of her lover. She remembers he is passionate and sensuous. He strikes a different chord for her than the loose, clean remarks at the table, and this excites her.

Patti asks, "What has given you this energy?"

The wife smiles and says, "Who knows?"

When her friends go, the wife reflects on her lies to them. She considers she may have to go on covering up the truth about her trips from the office to avoid trouble. Patti and Jen would be shocked to hear she was having an affair. The wife suddenly feels isolated. She tries to forget this when she visits her lover that night.

The husband struggles to rein in his drug use. He takes his pills to get started in the morning. He goes to his law office high. He researches and takes notes without weighing the relevance to his clients' cases.

When they meet, the husband and the wife are bored though they have come right from their acts of indulgence. They have different conversations since they have picked up their new interests. The husband holds back when he tells his wife about his day. He fears letting slip about his habit. He comes across as halting and unsure. Sometimes the wife makes a remark that suggests she may know he is taking the pills. "Did you enjoy working in the study tonight?" she says one night.

The husband hesitates, he fears too long, before saying, "I had a productive couple of hours."

The wife avoids telling about her secret more confidently. She claims she was running errands in town during lunch one day, calling her friends another. Actually she goes to meet her lover at a rendezvous point between their workplaces. She changes gears smoothly from her lie to the mundane affairs of the household.

The husband and the wife tense listening to each other's polite, formal words they neither like to say nor hear. They feel glad when they stop. They smile, sensing they can relax and forget the other once alone.

As they conduct their new private lives, the pair continues to have a normal social life. They hold parties in their home where they invite over their usual friends. The wife talks with them while her husband hangs out by the hors d'oeuvres. She leans toward a man who resembles her lover and her eyes dance, laughing. Talking to him excites her, especially as the husband is nearby. Her spouse stays by the punch. He enjoys the alcohol. He likes to forget himself and his wife as he drinks. A slightly sad feeling comes over him and he stays from everyone else, relishing it. A few come to talk with him, believing he must be lonely. They smile and speak in good cheer. The husband smiles, making signs he also is content. The people talk excitedly with him. The husband plans to take more pills the next day.

The husband and the wife are more on edge with one another. The husband reads a magazine while they eat at the breakfast table. Lowering his eyes, he hides his

exhausted downs after taking too many pills the previous evening. He reaches for the milk carton, struggling to keep his hand steady. He gives his wife a few tired, short answers—"Yes, I know", "I'm sure"—when she speaks but will not engage her. He trusts his answers suit her. The wife hedges when she talks with him, too. She worries about how far she has gone with her lover. They meet almost daily. She gives herself to him like an animal. She hopes for ever-new physical heights with him. However, she does not get them. Their acts are growing routine; sometimes, she hurries to finish and be done with them. Her lover has not talked as much with her lately, too. It seems that he expects their events and does not care for her otherwise as a person. He will not be coy; he is brief and does not indulge her when she lingers at his place. She wonders if he is bored with her.

The husband parts from the wife at the table. He feels their hesitation not right and that it must change. Otherwise they will break into some fight, some bitter argument, he trusts. They cannot just avoid each other and get by. Still, he mopes about the house rather than be with her. He fears her. He goes out to walk even if he has not popped his drug. The wife leaves the table and goes to the living room to read. She feels she will crack, hiding all she has. She is supposed to talk at ease with the husband and cannot.

The husband tries to quit taking the pills. He puts his supply into a back drawer of his study desk where it would be hard to retrieve. He reviews his books and writes his casework. He feels under strain as he does. He thinks soon that he cannot perform unless he has taken his drug. He makes an unusual effort to focus. He resists going for the drawer. How will I recover if I take them?, he wonders. He quits his study for the living room where his wife is reading a book.

"So how is your novel?" he asks.

In the book she reads, a frightened woman walks along a dark city street. "Decent," the wife answers. She does not lift her eyes from the page. She fears her spouse. That night upstairs, she considers telling him about her lover. How can I avoid saying the truth?, she ponders as she turns onto her side in bed.

The husband goes to a forest reserve alone one weekend. He plans to climb a mountain and take his pills at the view. Once in the reserve, he straps on his knapsack with his lunch and other goods inside. He hikes. He considers the wife at home as he marches past a row of pines. I am not going to like the view on the pills, he thinks. And I know I wanted to use them. He reaches the mountain height and takes the bottle from his pocket. He studies this, puts it back in his pocket and looks from the vista. Mountains roll before him like waves. He tenses surveying their great expanse; the green goes into the distance.

The wife tells her lover of her unhappiness in seeing him. He paces across the room and turns a few small figurines on the table. He says, "I'm sorry you feel so. I'm content being with you if you had doubted." The wife does not believe him, not after his many signs of boredom. However, she does not argue whether he was honest. She is

tired of trying to prove things. "I wish I could talk of you with my husband. I struggle over how I would. We do not talk and yet I think nothing else might set me free with him. I've kept quiet when he's there to feel safe. But I can't anymore." The wife sulks and sets her hand into her cheek. Her lover comes and stands before her, ready to offer help. He does not know what to say, however, and she knows it. She inspects the pattern in the carpet and does not lift her head.

The husband and the wife meet in their living room where they sit and watch TV. The husband considers the pills in his study. He has been in the mood for them awhile. He knows that he will continue so while missing them. He fidgets sometimes where he sits beside his spouse. He asks her, "What do you think of this program?", to show interest.

The wife studies the screen blankly. "This actress says too much," she answers. She holds quiet and the husband listens to the show with her. She believes she should tell the husband about her lover. She does not know if she will or what to say if her lover urges her to come to him. All she hopes for right now, and what might just be possible, is to sit beside her husband and act as if she were content.

CONTRIBUTORS

Chris Connolly's fiction has appeared in the *Irish Times*, the *Irish Independent*, the *Boston Review* and the Hennessy Book of Irish Fiction, among others. His work has won numerous awards, including Best Emerging Fiction at the Hennessy Literary Awards, the RTÉ Francis McManus competition, and the Over the Edge: New Writer of the Year award. He was also highly commended in the Manchester Fiction Prize. His website is chrisconnollywriter.com.

Donna D. Vitucci is Development Director of Covington Ladies Home, the only free-standing personal care home exclusively for older women in Northern Kentucky. Her stories have been appeared in print and online since 1990. *SALT OF PATRIOTS*, her novel concerning families & uranium processing in 1950s Fernald, OH, was published Spring 2017. Her first novel, *AT BOBBY TRIVETTE'S GRAVE*, takes place in Paris, KY, ninety miles south of Donna's home in Covington.

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"Tattoo" was accepted for publication at *Underscore Review* in December of 2017.

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