

# **SHORT STORY NIGHT**



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## **Ten Year Affair**

**Erin Somers**

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## Ten Year Affair | JOYLAND

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Cora met Sam in a baby group in their small town. They sat on blue plastic mats in the back room of an overpriced children's clothing store. Their infants squirmed in front of them on sheepskins. The room smelled like breast milk and baby heads and cruciferous vegetables boiled down to weakened, mealy fibers that one mom had brought in Tupperware and was trying to feed her ten month old.

"That baby doesn't want broccoli," said Sam.

He had a toothpick stuck to his lower lip. His mouth was sexy; the toothpick was not. He offered one to Cora. She took it so she could touch his hand. It tasted like cinnamon. Of all available affectations this one was openly oral, wholly about his lips and tongue, either keeping them busy or drawing attention to them. So which one was it, she asked him?

"Neither," he said. Now he was using his to prod his incisors at the gum line. "It's just something to do."

"To be a man and kill time chewing a wet stick," she said.

Across the room the weeping child ingested a bite from the Tupperware and her mother called out triumphantly, "See?"

It was the two of them against broccoli mom. That much was clear. They exchanged numbers to seal the alliance. The purpose was to text when they'd be at baby group. But soon they started meeting up elsewhere. They passed the long afternoons of parental leave that way. Her husband knew and did not seem to mind. They'd get a coffee, or sometimes a beer, at one of the places on Main Street. After, they'd push their babies uphill, toward the dark green mountain that stood at the top of the town.

Maybe because they had young children and were used to talking plainly about birth and shit and blood and bodies and the potential of death, their talk was frank. They were both married, both with a second kid, but spoke

candidly about their desire for each other. They could not sleep together because their motivations were not perfectly aligned. They overlapped but were not concentric. This was insurmountable. Cora wanted to fuck Sam. It was physical only, but had grown strong. She had no control over it. She became a slaving animal in his presence.

She told him this one afternoon, a few months into their acquaintance, on a stretch of sharp incline. Her quads burned and she panted slightly. He laughed.

“I shouldn’t have told you,” said Cora.

“No, I’m glad you did. It’s just the way you put it.”

Sam wanted her too, he explained, but there was nothing animal about it. It had more to do with liking Cora as a person. He would not cop to love. Cora found it hard to believe that it was merely about liking her. Liking was a mild way to feel. Did he want to fuck everything he liked? His computer? Grapefruit seltzer? A scattering of ducks on a pond where he wasn’t expecting to see ducks?

He said, “You’re attracted to me. I get that. But you don’t seem to *like* me much.”

“What’s with the emphasis on liking all the time?”

“Don’t you have feelings?”

She did have feelings. The feelings were that she wanted to get fucked onto the astral plane and not think about her life for a second. But this clearly wasn’t the right thing to say, so she reached into the feelings bag and yanked out “I’m crazy about you.” Sure, why not? It was bland, liking-adjacent. It was not necessarily a declaration of love. He seemed to accept it.

“Okay,” he said. “But can’t we be friends? It’s sad to me, the idea of not knowing you.”

“If I wanted a new friend, I’d find a woman, no offense.”

“So if we can’t be friends, what are we supposed to do,” he said. “Have a ten-year affair?”

They were silent. Their generation did not take off its clothes, did not put its keys in a bowl by the front door. Sex between men and women had become taboo in their generation, where everyone was striving, not incorrectly, to be an equal. Even the word affair had the ring of obsolescence, like a cigarette or an ad man or a chaise lounge.

“I’m kidding,” he said at last.

But the affair was there now. It was between them. Somewhere in the multiverse their alternates checked into a hotel room where the afternoon light came in at a slant and hit a champagne bucket just so. It was a cliché, but wild and enjoyable because it was happening to them, this mythic thing they’d heard about, this thing in quotes: “an affair.”



Two vectors ran parallel through Cora’s existence. One was what you might call reality, with bills and an ant problem in the kitchen and her marriage, which was mostly good. The other was her affair with Sam, technically fictional, its lies and illicit meetings, the racing pulse of infatuation.

Sometimes one was more present than the other. When one of her kids got sick, the affair was suspended for almost a week. She went back to work, and this took precedence for a while, until the old routines kicked in. The small talk and two pm granola bar, the rote cheer of email communication. Other times the affair was the more prominent of the two. In moments of boredom, in waiting rooms, on transit.

But mostly they stayed in balance.

So Cora sat in a mind-numbing meeting, as she met Sam in a darkened steakhouse. She made a suggestion about SEO while they each drank an ice-cold martini. There was coffee in the meeting at least, a big bitter carafe of it, and she refilled her cup as she reached for his cock under the table. Sam brushed back her hair from her ear, whispered something, and her boss

rapped his knuckles on the conference table, made a dumb joke about the moment everyone had been waiting for, and brought it around to monthly stats.

As she boiled water for pasta, she walked with Sam through a rainstorm. She tripped and he caught her coming off a street corner while she put her children to bed. During the hour-long drama that she watched with her husband, she was blowing Sam in the back seat of his car.

While she was running out to pick up milk she was running out to pick up milk so she could meet him in the dairy aisle of ShopRite and have him furtively put his hand up her skirt for thirty seconds before heading home.

And as she tweezed her eyebrows, looked up whale facts with her kid, fed herself or other people, picked up toys, answered work emails at ten pm, ran on a treadmill, locked herself in the bathroom for no reason she could immediately determine, she thought of him. She thought of him always in both timelines. In one it was with longing and despair and the other with longing and regret. She longed for him while she longed for him. She yearned while she yearned. She pined while she pined, and so on.



Sam called her, in reality, after several weeks of not seeing each other, and they met up for a drink. He'd gone back to work, too. He looked handsome and unhappy in office casual. He'd learned a new trick with his toothpick. He used his tongue to flip it over the long way. He had to stretch his mouth open wide to do it. She willed him to touch her and he didn't.

He began immediately with the intense conversation. He had not enjoyed their time apart. He thought of her often. He was suffering. Since they could not have sex, he said, he wanted a legitimate way to know her. He wanted to install her in his life. He wanted her as a permanent fixture.

"Sounds like what you actually want is a new sink," she said.

"You have a great personality," he said. "You know that?"

Her whole life, people had railed on about her personality. Such a smart girl — woman! Such a smart woman. And funny. It got worse (better) as she got older. Kind, empathetic, a good parent. That was nice, right? That was what you wanted. But couldn't this one man objectify her?

“Okay,” she said.

“I'm serious. I think all four of us should hang out. My wife, your husband.”

“Does your wife know how we talk to each other?”

“It's not impossible that I'll tell her. I try to be honest with her.”

“So you want me to be friends with her. But she'll just know, it'll just be out there, that I'm a slaving animal. Self-described.”

They stared at each other. He attempted to do the toothpick trick and choked and half- puked it out. In the other timeline they were laughing at a joke one of them had made. In the other timeline his hand was on her thigh and no one had just sort of thrown up. Her hair looked better over there, too.

“How about instead of all that I send you one nude?” said Cora.

Sam laughed. “No.”

“Just one. A tasteful one. Not too porny.”

“I want to have you as a friend,” he said again. Have her. Have.

Someone already had her though. Her husband, Eliot.

She said to Eliot, later, standing in their kitchen, “To what degree do you feel like you have me?”

He was eating, as usual, smearing an apple with almond butter and taking big demonstrative bites.

“Like possess you?”

“Yes.”

“Zero,” he said.

“No, but you do.”

Long pause while he smeared and bit. “Not really.”

“You do. I have obligations to you. You have access to me. I exist to you on certain terms. I’m your wife. You have me. You get to have me.”

“I don’t think about it like that.”

“How do you think of it?”

“We’re best friends. We have two kids together. I enjoy being around you. You’re fun. We both elect to be here.”

“You’re saying you like me.”

“Exactly,” he said. “Yo, hand me one of those.”

He meant a napkin. She gave him a look. She was nursing the baby. Their older daughter sat on her foot playing with a Barbie doll.

“Not because you’re my property, because you’re right there. God, fine, I’ll get it.” Eliot retrieved a napkin. “I don’t possess you. I’m fine with you hanging out with that guy from the baby group, whatever’s going on there.”

“Nothing’s going on with Sam,” said Cora. She had to look away. It hurt a lot to say it.



She gave in. They had Sam and his wife over for dinner. The wife’s name was Jules and she had no apparent bad traits except that she allowed the toothpicks. She even took one herself after dinner when Sam offered them around. Eliot took one too. They sat in Cora’s yard sucking their wood splinters, drinking wine, and talking about pre-k.

In the timeline that contained their affair, Sam and Cora were alone. The leaves in the yard were a dark blue previously only seen in dreams. The strap of Cora's dress fell off her shoulder and Sam kissed the place it had been.

In reality, Sam was shouting about school registration, how you had to go visit this eighty-year-old woman Rose in her office full of dying plants and make a case for why your kid should be assigned your school of choice. Wasn't that quaint and the reason all of them had moved out there?

"That was our vision all right," said Cora.

She rose on the pretext of grabbing the cobbler. Eliot glanced at her: there was no cobbler. She went in and climbed the stairs and stood in front of the bedroom window and watched the three of them talking and laughing. Night crawled diagonally across the yard. Where their affair was going on, she and Sam had adjourned to the bedroom to try to shock each other with their respective depravities.

She found that she was chewing a toothpick herself and spit it out on the floor, then picked it up and threw it away in the bathroom trash. She checked on the baby and the baby and the other baby and the other baby. Two were sleeping and two were playing sweetly with a train that linked up using magnets. She sat down with them and made up a story about how the train had left the land of chores and rules for the land of toys and candy. The children were easy to delight. Sam came in and stood behind her, resting his hand lightly on her head. Even this level of contact elicited a full body reaction and he must have known that.

He said, "It's going well, right? Jules likes you. I told you."

Another admirer. How their ranks swelled. They could erect a monument to her in the town square. An extremely fucking likeable woman — that's what the plaque could say.

"Great," said Cora. "I like her too."





Ten years passed in both worlds, in all worlds. In the timeline of the affair Cora's affection deepened and she admitted she was in love. The sex never got old. Sam quit the toothpicks. In late summer they walked in the park and a doe with white-tipped ears came over and nuzzled Sam in the leg and laid her soft snout in Cora's hand. They drank too much wine that night and conceived a baby, oops, and this led to weeks of wrenching conversation. He said he wanted a baby with her, of course he did, but was it ethical or responsible, was it cool, to ruin the lives of six existing people to produce one new person with their shared genes? Maybe not cool, she said, no. But she wanted it and you could want something bad enough that you needed it. You could want something so bad it became indivisible from your survival.

You'll survive, he said. They decided to terminate.

Over on the other side their kids got older. They haggled with Rose to keep them in the same class. The two families went on vacation together. Cora enjoyed Jules' company. They made each other laugh. Jules was better than her at most things — sports, cooking, career advancement — and this felt good to Cora, the way it felt good to tongue a canker sore.

Occasionally, the vectors veered closer together. She was walking home from the library one day, when Sam pulled up beside her in his car.

He said, "You're always walking around town. You're the lady who walks around town."

She got in and they drove up the mountain. When she asked where they were going, he said, "Not sure."

She felt a shiver, the brush of the uncanny against her cheek. This exact thing would happen in the other timeline. In fact, it was happening over there, with minor differences.

Sam stopped at an overlook. A breeze came in the open windows that smelled sweetly of the ground. The town spread out before them, red and brown and grey rooftops sloping down toward a river slashed with sunlight. It

seemed like a make-out spot. Cora turned to Sam. Sam put his head on the steering wheel.

“Read to me from that book you have, whatever it is,” he said.

It was a book that she’d gotten for her daughter, *Butterflies and Moths of North America*.

She opened to a random page and read, “In the second stage of the life cycle, the larva hatches from the egg ...”

“Okay stop,” he said.

“Well, what were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. Poetry or something.”

Did he think she took romantic strolls down to the library to check out books of poetry? Was he picturing her doing that, when he pictured her?

“It’s for homework,” she said. “Insect unit.”

“You’re a great mom,” he said.

“Eh. It’s pretty baseline. It’s picking up a book.”

He gave her the kind of look that usually precedes a passionate gesture. His hands were shaking. He rubbed them on his jeans. Since they’d known each other there’d been no incidents of sexual contact between them, though the restraint this required was itself quasi-sexual.

“We should go,” he said.

He started the car and they left.



At the end of ten years Sam shocked them all by asking Jules for a divorce. Cora heard it first from Jules.

“An idiot fuckhead’s on the way to your house,” she said, over the phone.

Sam came to Cora in her backyard. She was kicking a soccer ball around with her kids. The one who'd been a baby when they met was ten now, and kicked the ball at him. It hit him in the stomach and he said, "Ow." Then he launched into a monologue about how she should leave Eliot. He loved her as a friend but he also wanted her physically. He always had.

The two vectors aligned, snapping into place. With only one timeline in motion, it was profoundly quiet.

Her older kid said, "What the fuck?" and Cora had to go through the theater of disapproval. *Don't say fuck. It's rude.* Meanwhile Sam stood waiting for an answer. She sent the kids inside.

"I want to marry you," he said.

Cora laughed. "Marry?"

Marriage had never been the point. Marriage was the opposite of the point. Anyway, in the world of the affair, things had not been the same between them since the abortion. On the day of her appointment he wanted to be there but he'd agreed to chaperone his kid's field trip to the state capitol. She thought she'd be fine, but she wasn't. She sat in recovery alone. How could he have left her sitting there like that? She'd pictured him listening politely to a tour guide, helping to distribute bag lunches. It made her lonely. Obligations were not for the world of the affair.

Albany, New York was not. Municipalities, the halls of legislation.

She knew she could not say this out loud. She knew her imaginings within imaginings would not translate. The way quotidian pain and disappointment had bled through to her fantasy life would not be explicable to this man who chewed toothpicks. Or probably to anyone.

"You made me wait too long," she said finally.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Sam reached out to touch her arm. His touch was hot. She felt an internal revving, but it was distant, or she thought, if she wanted to, she could will it to be distant. She considered accepting his offer to see what would happen. Various vectors appeared, like tines on a fork. He'd be a great husband and they'd be in love forever. He'd be terrible and she'd instantly regret it. She'd cheat on him with Eliot, casually and for decades. Or, by some calculation, she and Jules would end up together. They'd pick a random state on the map, Utah, say, and move there with all four kids.

She must have been quiet for a long time because he said, "What are you thinking?" This startled her. What an invasion.

"None of your business," she said.

Really, it had almost nothing to do with him.

Edited by: [Michelle Lyn King](#)

Erin Somers is the author of the novel *Stay Up with Hugo Best*. Her writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Tin House Open Bar*, *Ploughshares*, *American Short Fiction*, *McSweeney's*, *The Cincinnati Review*, and many other publications. She holds an MFA from the University of New Hampshire and was a 2016 NYC Center for Fiction Emerging Writer Fellow and a 2016 Millay Colony resident. She lives in Beacon, New York, with her husband and daughter.