



7-15-1994

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Mark Spencer

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### Recommended Citation

Spencer, Mark (1994) "Sweet Time," *Westview*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 4 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol13/iss4/6>

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# SWEET TIME

*Mark Spencer*

Dave sits in his old pickup truck in front of The Sweet Time Dairy Bar in Portsmouth, waiting for Lori. About a hundred yards away the Ohio River flows by high and muddy. The Sweet Time stays open all year, and even on cold, damp nights like tonight, customers stop by for ice cream cones and sundaes. The McDonald's down the street sells yogurt now instead of ice cream, but The Sweet Time still sells the stuff that will rot your teeth and clog your arteries.

Lori gives her patients little booklets that tell them to avoid anything that tastes good—at least that's how Dave sees it. He has always been suspicious of dentists trying to make people feel guilty for eating sugar and for not brushing and flossing ten times a day. When he's kidded her about being a rich dentist, Lori has insisted that dentistry isn't as good a career as it was in the old days before fluoride was put in everybody's drinking water. Her saying that supports his belief that dentists are secretly glad their warnings are ignored by most people. Dentists love cavities and gum diseases—money in the bank. A dentist one time told Dave's dad that Dave needed ten fillings. Dad took him to another dentist who said he needed only three.

You can't trust anybody, Dave believes. He winces thinking about what Lori did to him two years ago. She put him to sleep and drilled holes through four of his front teeth. He guesses she could have done worse. He squeezes his knees together while he looks at The Sweet Time, a small hut (green like a bad tooth) with dirty windows.

Lori drilled holes through four of his teeth because, she said, she loved him so much.

She pointed out that, with him unconscious, she could have drilled his eyes out so that he could never look at another woman.

He hasn't seen her for two weeks. When they talked on the phone yesterday, she said she had to tell him something. Her voice sounded sad. It had a catch in it when she told him she loved him. Of the things that can be wrong, Dave has focused on the possibility that she has breast cancer. There's always something on TV about it.

Last night Dave had trouble sleeping. He kept thinking about how he was going to get to make love to Lori for the first time in two weeks.

He kept thinking about breast cancer.

Two years ago, Dave lost a lot of sleep. He wanted Lori to leave her husband, but she wouldn't because they had the dental practice together and because of her little girls. She also didn't want to risk losing her house, a restored 1817 stone mansion. Dave figured she mainly didn't want to hook up with a bum like him, a small-time farmer.

Lori's kids are eight and ten now. During that bad time two years ago, Dave got his first glimpse of them. He was driving down the Appalachian Highway one Sunday morning on his way to help an old farmer repair some fences his cows kept escaping through when Lori's Caprice Classic suddenly came up behind him and then passed him in the outside lane. Her husband was driving, and her kids were in the back seat. The four of them were dressed up. Lori stared straight ahead, ignoring Dave.

He pressed the truck's accelerator to come up beside them again to get another look. Her husband was pale and thin and had orange hair and an



orange beard. No wonder Lori wanted a lover, Dave thought. The little girls had orange hair and big splotches of freckles—ugly kids, really. The Caprice pulled ahead again. Dave drove faster to catch up. The little girls were staring at him. Lori's husband was saying something, probably about the jerk in the pickup truck. Lori just stared straight ahead. Dave wanted her to look at him, to acknowledge him in some way. He didn't like



Illustration by Jan Bradfield  
Photographs by Frankie Herzer

being ignored as if he didn't count. His face felt hot, and he pumped the accelerator so that the truck roared. Then he noticed a dog, a cocker spaniel, in the back seat with the little girls. She's never told him they had a dog. That made him even madder for some reason.

When the Caprice slowed down, he slowed down. Lori's husband honked at him, and Dave honked back and flipped him the bird. Suddenly, the Caprice cut into a left-hand turn lane, and looking back, Dave saw it pull into the lot of a Methodist church.

Lori threw a fit the next time they saw each other. She picked up the phone book in their motel room and threw it at him. She told him he was stupid and crazy and dangerous, and she cried. Angry, they made love. She slapped, pinched, and bit him. Finally, they just held each other. She admitted that she like the way he cared so much.

He got to see Lori only once a week usually. Often, around eleven at night while he watched MTV, Dave would suddenly be hit by a vision of Lori in bed with her husband. All the sexy women in the videos on MTV reminded him of Lori.

One Friday night when he was feeling miserable, he went to the Quicky convenience store on the highway and talked the check-out girl into going on a camping trip with him that weekend. She was bone-thin and always looked sleepy and moved lazily.

Dave's and the girl's shadows were big on the wall of their dimly lit tent. It was almost like having a mirror. Dave liked the narrowness of her waist and hips and her skinny thighs, but she kept her head turned to one side and seemed distracted.

When he looked around, he saw that she had her hands above his back and was making shadow animals.

Lori shows up at The Sweet Time, but she doesn't park. She pulls in, turns around, and Dave follows her Caprice up Water Street. There's a nice restaurant along here called The Riverview, but they've never eaten there because Lori is afraid of being recognized by somebody. Dentists are famous in a small town. In fact, Lori and her husband recently started running an ad in the county paper each week with their picture: The Harrison Family Dental Clinic.

But Dave had no idea who she was the first time he saw her. They were both shopping at the Kroger supermarket. He had picked up six or seven women in grocery stores since his wife died. Often they came on to him first, asking something like whether he knew where the hot sauce was or what kind of light bulbs burned brightest. (Even in kindergarten he had had the girls after him; it seemed God had given him looks and nothing else.) He noticed Lori giving him the eye by the frozen food section, and he asked her whether those Lean Cuisine frozen dinners were really as good as people claimed. She told him he needed his teeth cleaned, to make an appointment for a Wednesday. She gave him her business card.

Her husband never worked on Wednesdays. She told Dave that Ed usually drove into Cincinnati on Wednesdays to visit buddies from dental school or to do some kind of vague research at the university library and that he never got back home before midnight. Lori said she was almost certain he had a woman there, probably some young thing with an overbite; Ed thought over-

bites were really sexy. She pointed out that all the girls—the receptionist and the two dental assistants—who worked in their office had overbites.

The first time she and Dave went to a motel, she said, "Instead of me wearing black panties or something like that, Ed would rather have me put on some fake buck teeth, I think."

The time she drilled the holes in Dave's teeth they met at her office late at night. He was worried because she said he definitely had mouth cancer.

He still doesn't know how she found out about the camping trip. It's disturbing to think she has mysterious ways of finding things out about him. He wonders whether it's true that the F.B.I. has a file on everybody.

She parks along the flood wall. When she gets in the truck, they kiss. She tastes like peppermint.

"I thought I saw one of my patients back there at the dairy bar. That's why I didn't stop."

That's okay, but I was startin' to worry where you were."

"I would have met you on time, but the baby-sitter was late."

"Bad thing about Wednesday nights is you got to find a baby-sitter that's not Baptist." Dave has said this he doesn't know how many times, but Lori always smiles. "What do you have to tell me?" he asks.

"We'll talk later."

"Are you sick?"

"No. Let's just have a good time now."

They can see the lights of tugboats as they drive along the river and lights on the Kentucky side. Dave is giddy with lust. They smile at each other every few seconds, and Dave squeezes her thigh.



Lori likes to wear a lot of jewelry—broaches, necklaces, bracelets, rings on every finger, studded belts. Diamonds, rubies, sapphires. More diamonds. She sparkles all over.

Dave has accepted seeing Lori only three or four times a month, accepted the fact that money and children bind her to a man with orange hair. His acceptance of the situation has been gradual. It's like a handicap he's learned to live with that causes only occasional pain.

They go through Aberdeen and across the bridge there to Maysville, then wind up a mountain, on top of which is their favorite motel. It's a bright vision in the night. The El Rancho. Flood lights illuminate giant blue steers and golden bulls and white horses all made of plaster and spray painted—and other animals, ones you don't find on a ranch. A purple zebra. A pink giraffe. They all graze in the parking lot.

After a while, when they're just holding each other, he says, "I love you more than my truck."

"Your truck is a pile of junk."

"Yeah, but I love it. It's the one thing I don't owe any money on."

"You're good to me."

"I gotta be. You're a scary woman. You and your dentist drills."

"Do you have to bring that up all the time? I capped your teeth for you after I did it. I was insane to do that. I've grown up a lot since then."

"You mean I can see other women and you won't come after me. Lady dentist from hell." He pretends his finger is a drill and forces her mouth open.

"I was jealous then. It was stupid."

"I forgive you." He pretends his finger is a drill again, and she sucks it.

It's drizzling outside when they leave. The giant animals in the parking lot seem to Dave like reminders of the dangers of the world they're returning to. The pale-pink giraffe makes him think of Lori's husband.

The vinyl seat of the truck is cold. Lori looks older than she did a few minutes ago, but she still looks good. She has confessed to him that she used to drink a lot. Chugged vodka when she was fifteen. Now she goes to AA meetings, has for five years. Dave thought booze always ruined a woman's looks. He fears that one day all that past abuse will go off under her skin like a time bomb. He remembers the way Dad looked the last few months he was alive, the broken vessels in his nose, his slack jowls, the sloppy belly.

Dave drives down the mountain into Maysville slowly. Fog has swallowed up the town. The Ohio River has vanished. Dave's truck creeps along. As they approach the bridge, Lori says, "I need to tell you something."

He forgot he was worried about her. "You're pregnant."

"No."

"Then you must want to borrow money." And he laughs.

"I was going to tell you back in the room, but ..."

The bridge makes a high whine as they cross it. The truck feels unsteady, wobbles. On the Ohio side there's a patch of bright street lights, and Lori's jewels sparkle. Then there are no lights, and Dave can barely see her beside him. He starts to worry



again. Breast cancer. He squints, trying to see through the fog.

"I've been seeing somebody else," she says.

For a minute, Dave forgets to breath. "A man?"

"I've been seeing him for ten weeks."

"That's impossible."

"No."

"But... How? I mean, how do you manage to see me and somebody else, too?"

"I've had to lie to Ed a lot."

"I didn't mean how do you find the time. I meant another kind of how."

"It really has been awful."

"I bet it has."

"You don't have to be nasty. He's a nice man. He's a lawyer."

"What's his name?"

"You don't know him."

"What's his name?"

"Bruce."

"Bruce," Dave says softly, his hands squeezing the steering wheel. He hates her. She's a broken down alcoholic who whores around.

"I didn't plan anything to happen. He's married, too."

"I thought only fags were named Bruce."

"He's going to tell his wife about us, and I think I'm finally going to make a break from Ed."

"You'll leave your husband for this guy? What about your dental practice? What about your kids? Huh? What about your lousy *house*?"

"Dave, honey, I'll always love you. But I love Bruce, too. And I have to be practical."

A long time ago, she told Dave about a real estate agent she'd had an affair with before he came along. He wonders now how many men she has-

n't told him about. Once when they were making love, she said nobody had ever made love to her the way he did. *Nobody*. The way she said it implied large numbers. He thinks she told him about the real estate agent because she thought he'd laugh at her story of how the guy could talk just like Donald Duck, how sometimes he did his Donald Duck impersonation while they were in bed.

She's crying, but he doesn't care. He considers slamming the truck into a tree.

"I'm going to miss you," she says.

"You're the craziest \_\_\_\_ I ever met."

"Fine, Dave. Be a child."

"Jesus. You loved me so much you nearly killed me two years ago. What happened to that love?"

"I'm a complex person."

"You're a nut."

The fog continues to be thick along the road to Portsmouth. Some red and blue and yellow lights appear suddenly, and he pulls off the road. The lights are neon beer signs in the windows of a run-down bar. He pulls into a slot between two cars. A Miller High Life sign blinks a couple of feet from the hood of the truck. The cab is filled with shadows and colors coming and going. It is as though Lori is there one moment, her face red, blue, and yellow—then she's gone, swallowed up in blackness.

She says, "Tell me you still love me. It would make me feel a lot better."

Dave glares at her. He wants to beat her. He wants to beg her not to do this to him. He hears faint music coming from the bar. A whiny pedal steel sound.

