

Tessa Hadley on Marriage's Metamorphoses

The author discusses “The Maths Tutor,” her story from the latest issue of the magazine.

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

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Your story “The Maths Tutor” is about a middle-aged couple in the nineteen-nineties, in which the man, Quent, a musician, clings to the self-centered rebellious loucheness of his youth, while the woman, Lorraine, works a conventional job and takes care of their three children. It feels almost inevitable, given the disparity in their maturity levels, that something will have to change—or is it?

When I wrote about long marriages in my novel “Late in the Day,” I compared the experience of being married for decades to that folktale in which you have to hang on to your lover while he or she undergoes a series of metamorphoses, including some monstrous ones. I remember being told when I was a child that we change our skins seven times in a lifetime—I’m not sure how scientific that is, but long marriages are a bit like that. Incrementally, perhaps almost imperceptibly to those involved, each partner goes through a succession of transformations—in appearance, in degree of contentment, in character, and in his or her role in the outside world, as well as within the power balance of the relationship. I love the way that fiction can make drama out of this, telescoping those processes which may feel, as we live through them, almost geologically slow. Fiction can speed them up and display them boldly and starkly against the background of passing time. It’s like rendering fate itself inside the story frame. When Lorraine was an unhappy girl in a narrowly constrained and unhappy household, Quent was her doorway into a bigger, bolder world. But they can’t stay in that configuration—of rescuer and rescued—for the rest of their lives.

We know that Lorraine doesn’t get the reinforcement or support that she needs from her husband. But why do you think she falls so

hard for her son's maths tutor, who seems fairly ordinary? Is it the ordinariness itself that draws her? The quality of his attention to others?

I suppose that a cynical answer—and I'm almost alarmed, or at least surprised, at what a bitter little story this has turned out to be—might be that Greg simply appears in her life at the right moment. She's open just then in a newly vulnerable way, in her forties, coming to the end of her role as a homemaker for her children, just as her daughters come into their own as young women. But Greg's personality in particular does fit her need, her sense of all the things in herself that have been left unanswered, unsatisfied. It is partly, yes, that quality of his attention to others, his observing others rather than imposing himself as Quent does. When, at the end of the story, Lorraine thinks back to what didn't happen, it's that feeling of *being seen* that she misses. As she slips off her coat, she allows herself one tragic, private gulp of grieving for what she hasn't had, before she picks herself up, as one does, to carry on with the rest of a life. That's a huge thing—in a sense, she gives up on ever being seen. Except that the story and the reader see her.

And I don't think Greg is so uninteresting, although obviously I do give him that Boy Scoutish overcautiousness which makes him turn down Lorraine's offer of herself. So we don't know, can't know for sure, whether he was ever actually capable of giving her what she thirsted for. Perhaps he was always too prim, too careful of himself, to quite deserve her? But the story leaves that question wholly open, as it remains in Lorraine's own wondering. And, of course, Greg's under no obligation to Lorraine. He hasn't promised her anything. You can't make anyone want you.

But it's not entirely beside the point that he has been an anthropologist, a watcher, someone who studies people's behaviors, their selves. Lorraine wants to be *studied*, I think, as much as she wants to be loved. (Quent "loves" her, doesn't he?) Or, rather, that's how she imagines this different kind of love she so desires: as a way of being seen and

understood, interpreted. Quent's love is rather like what a child might feel for his mother; his wife is an unexamined ground of being. Lorraine dreams of another form of connection.

Is Lorraine's hankering for something more in life—for something to fuel her own personal happiness—a normal midlife crisis (if there is such a thing) or is it a deeper reckoning with past and future and her own identity?

I think it's not merely self-indulgent. There's really something missing in the particular version of femininity she's performing—capable, tolerant, responsible, brusque, self-sufficient, wry—in relation to Quent's version of masculinity, which is freewheeling, audacious, narcissistic, heedless, experimental. Her sensibility is subtle enough for her to be dissatisfied with that limited presentation of herself. She believes that something larger is really possible—and I think the way I've written the story encourages us, too, to imagine that it's possible. The story doesn't think she's merely silly in her longing. I hope it respects her longing. I feel very sympathetic to it.

What elements of the story did you already have in mind when you started writing? Did anything surprise you as the story progressed?

Before I had a title for it, each time I saved the file I called it the "humiliation story." So that was obviously fundamental to how I imagined it, before I started. The subject is the woman's opening herself radically to a new possibility of life, and being refused, and what that feels like—and what she does with the refusal, how she turns it into a different kind of liberation (and what this costs her). As I began to write, I didn't realize how fundamental Quent was to the story's machinery. To begin with, he was just the necessarily flawed husband who precipitated her wanting something else. But then I wrote the bit about his being the wolf-not-at-the-door, and I loved calling him the wolf. And after that I imagined a cruel twist of the story's knife: that while Lorraine makes her peace with the old wolf and expresses her newfound force in another realm—through her success in business, money, maths (the irony!)—the

wolf himself might let her down. Defeated old wolf. The words rang in my imagination. It's the last thing she wants. Old wolves should at least go on being wolfish, to keep up their part of the marriage bargain. The idea that the next transformation might be into hangdog defeat . . . she isn't ready for that yet.

I'd always known that Greg would write an inept letter, which would humiliate and scald Lorraine even further, and that it would arrive on the very day they were moving into their grand new house. But then—it was obvious, but I didn't get it until halfway through writing—I saw exactly what it was that transformed the old wolf and defeated him. It was inevitable once I'd seen it! He had to find the letter and read it, and it would change his perception of Lorraine forever. It was back to the theme I started with: hanging on to your spouse while he or she transforms into something unrecognizable and monstrous. Suddenly, his dear wife seems to him a stranger in his bed. Poor old Quent.

Quent is a bit of a solipsist. Do you think that the shock of realizing that he is not necessarily the center of everyone else's world could lead to real, positive change in him, or only, as it does within the confines of the narrative, leave him downcast and resentful?

It's a savage little story, really—though I hope it's comedic and a bit touching, too. And I mean there to be great familial warmth in it, despite the imperfect marriage. Lorraine has her children. Her fundamental involvement with them—which clearly continues into their adult lives—is the spine of the story in a way. We feel how they sympathize with their mother and put up with their father. But that's family. They'll probably maintain their close connection, all five of them.

But it is a bit savage. I wouldn't want to place bets on Quent learning to become a better person. He might just be more grumpy and sorry for himself. Who knows? There are decades ahead for more changes and revelations. Some of those hard men get mawkish and sentimental as they grow older. They warm up just as their women cool down. Funnily enough, I don't think Lorraine would enjoy Quent's starting to follow

her around with a new scrutinizing attentiveness, trying to take her in and know her. . . . Another twist of the story-knife: the very thing she thought she most wanted she wouldn't want from *him*. It's too late for that.

As usual with your work, there's such a strong sense of chronological verisimilitude to "The Maths Tutor." I felt very much transported to the late eighties and nineties while reading it (though I am not of Quent and Lorraine's generation). What did you do to immerse yourself in the details of that time period while writing?

It's inside my own life span, so it was easy. I can't help being aware of those shifts of perception and style and aesthetic which I've lived through myself, so I just look back and remember. . . . The political posters, the earthenware mugs, the piano. . . . The men. How attractive they were, those wicked wolves!

You have a new collection, "After the Funeral and Other Stories," out this month. The stories aren't linked in terms of plot or characters, but do you think there's an underlying theme to the book?

If there is, it's not intentional. Those are just the last twelve stories I wrote. If anything, when I'm dreaming up each new story I try to do something different from the one before. If I've written about children, I try to find a story to tell about adults; if I've set something in the seventies, I try to do something contemporary. Of course, certain themes do recur. Young people trying to learn how to live; mysteries surfacing in the everyday; everyone telling themselves stories about who they are. Disappointment—yes, that's a theme, how could it not be? But I sort of want to find the rich lining inside my characters' perception of their disappointment, as with Lorraine in this story (which isn't in the new collection), or the last story in the book, which was also published in *The New Yorker*, "Coda." But I guess these are just *my* themes, the things that preoccupy me and seem full and exciting at the moment. ♦