

THE  
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# THE PRAIRIE WIFE

**By Curtis Sittenfeld** February 5, 2017



Photograph by Grant Cornett for The New Yorker



**Audio:** *Curtis Sittenfeld reads.*

The understanding is that, after Casey's iPhone alarm goes off at 6:15 A.M., Kirsten wakes the boys, nudges them to get dressed, and herds them downstairs, all while Casey is showering. The four of them eat breakfast as a family, deal with teeth-brushing and backpacks, and Casey, who is the principal of the middle school in the same district as the elementary school Jack and Ian attend, drives the boys to drop-off. Kirsten then takes her shower in the newly quiet house before leaving for work.

The reality is that, at 6:17, as soon as Casey shuts the bathroom door, Kirsten grabs her own iPhone from her nightstand and looks at Lucy Headrick's Twitter feed. Clearly, Kirsten is not alone: Lucy has 3.1 million followers. (She follows a mere five hundred and thirty-three accounts, many of which belong to fellow-celebrities.) Almost all of Lucy's vast social-media empire, which of course is an extension of her life-style-brand empire (whatever the fuck a life-style brand is), drives Kirsten crazy. Its content is fake and pandering and boring and repetitive—how many times will Lucy post variations on the same recipe for buttermilk biscuits?—and Kirsten devours all of it, every day: Facebook and Instagram, Tumblr and Pinterest, the blog, the vlog, the TV show. Every night, Kirsten swears that she won't devote another minute to Lucy, and every day she squanders hours. The reason that things go wrong so early in the morning, she has realized, is this: she's pretty sure Twitter is the only place where real, actual Lucy is posting, Lucy whom Kirsten once knew. Lucy has insomnia, and, while all the other posts on all the other sites might be written by Lucy's minions, Kirsten is certain that it was Lucy herself who, at 1:22 A.M., wrote, "Watching Splash on cable, oops I forgot to name one of my daughters Madison!" Or, at 3:14 A.M., accompanied by a photo of an organic candy bar: "Hmm could habit of eating chocolate in middle of night be part of reason I can't sleep LOL!"

Morning, therefore, is when there's new, genuine Lucy sustenance. So how can Kirsten resist? And then the day is Lucy-contaminated already, and there's little incentive for Kirsten not to keep polluting it for the sixteen hours until she goes to bed with the bullshit folksiness in Lucy's life: the acquisition of an Alpine goat, the canning of

green beans, the baby shower that Lucy is planning for her young friend Jocelyn, who lives on a neighboring farm.

As it happens, Lucy has written (or “written”? Right? There’s no way) a memoir, with recipes—“Dishin’ with the Prairie Wife”—that is being published today, so Kirsten’s latest vow is that she’ll buy the book (she tried to reserve it from the library and learned that she was three hundred and fifth in line), read it, and then be done with Lucy. Completely. Forever.

The memoir has been “embargoed”—as if Lucy is, like, Henry Kissinger—and, to promote it, Lucy travelled yesterday from her farm in Missouri to Los Angeles. (As she told Twitter, “BUMMM-PEE flyin over the mountains!!”) Today, she will appear on a hugely popular TV talk show on which she has been a guest more than once. Among last night’s tweets, posted while Kirsten was sleeping, was the following: “Omigosh you guys I’m so nervous + excited for Mariana!!! Wonder what she will ask . . .” The pseudo-nervousness, along with the “Omigosh”—never “Omigod,” or even “OMG”—galls Kirsten. Twenty years ago, Lucy swore like a normal person; but the Lucy of now, Kirsten thinks, resembles Casey, who, when their sons were younger, respectfully asked Kirsten to stop cursing in front of them. Indeed, the Lucy of now—beloved by evangelicals, homeschooler of her three daughters, wife of a man she refers to as the Stud in Overalls, who is a deacon in their church—uses such substitutes as “Jiminy Crickets!” and “Fudge Nuggets!” Once, while making a custard on-air, Lucy dropped a bit of eggshell into the mix and exclaimed, “Shnookerdookies!” Kirsten assumed that it was staged, or maybe not originally staged but definitely not edited out when it could have been. This made Kirsten feel such rage at Lucy that it was almost like lust.

Kirsten sees that, last night, Lucy, as she usually does, replied to a few dozen tweets sent to her by nobodies: Nicole in Seattle, who has thirty-one followers; Tara in Jacksonville, who’s a mom of two awesome boys. (Aren’t we all? Kirsten thinks.) Most of the fans’ tweets say some variation of “You’re so great!” or “It’s my birthday pretty please wish me a happy birthday?!” Most of Lucy’s responses say some variation of “Thank you for the kind words!” or “Happy Birthday!” Kirsten has never tweeted at Lucy; in fact, Kirsten has never tweeted. Her Twitter handle is not her name but “Minneap” plus the last three digits of her Zip Code, and, instead of uploading a photo of herself, she’s kept the generic egg avatar. She has three followers, all of whom appear to be bots.

Through the bathroom door, Kirsten can hear the shower running, and the minute that Casey turns it off—by this point, Kirsten is, as she also does daily, reading an article about how smartphones are destroying people’s ability to concentrate—she springs from bed, flicking on light switches in the master bedroom, the hall, and the boys’ rooms. When Casey appears, wet hair combed, completely dressed, and finds Ian still under the covers and Kirsten standing by his bureau, Kirsten frowns and says that both boys seem really tired this morning. Casey nods sombrely, even though it’s what Kirsten says every morning. Is Casey clueless, inordinately patient, or both?

At breakfast, Jack, who is six, asks, “Do doctors ever get sick?”

“Of course,” Casey says. “Everyone gets sick.”

While packing the boys’ lunches, Kirsten says to Ian, who is nine, “I’m giving you Oreos again today, but you need to eat your cucumber slices, and if they’re still in your lunchbox when you come home you don’t get Oreos tomorrow.”

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She kisses the three of them goodbye, and as soon as the door closes, even before she climbs the stairs, Kirsten knows that she's going to get herself off using the handheld showerhead. She doesn't consider getting herself off using the handheld showerhead morally problematic, but it presents two logistical complications, the first of which is that, the more often she does it, the more difficult it is for Casey to bring her to orgasm on the occasions when they're feeling ambitious enough to have sex. The second complication is that it makes her late for work. If Kirsten leaves the house at 7:45, she has a fifteen-minute drive; if she leaves at or after 7:55, the drive is twice as long. But, seriously, what else is she supposed to do with her Lucy rage?

**K**irsten's commute is when she really focusses on whether she has the power to destroy Lucy Headrick's life. Yes, the question hums in the background at other moments, like when Kirsten is at the grocery store and sees a cooking magazine with Lucy on the cover—it's just so fucking weird how famous Lucy is—but it's in the car that Kirsten thinks through, in a realistic way, which steps she'd take. She's figured out where she could leak the news, and narrowed it down to two gossip Web sites, both based in Manhattan; she's even found the "Got tips?" link on one. If she met somebody who worked for such a site, and if the person promised she could remain anonymous, it would be tempting. But, living in Minneapolis, Kirsten will never meet anyone who works for a Manhattan gossip Web site.

Kirsten's co-worker Frank has volunteered to leak the news for her; indeed, he's so eager that she fears he might do it without her blessing, except that he knows she knows he pads his expense reports when he travels. And it's Frank's joyous loathing of Lucy that reins in Kirsten's own antipathy. Frank has never met the woman, so what reason does he have to hate her? Because she's successful? This, in Kirsten's opinion, isn't sufficient. Kirsten hates Lucy Headrick because she's a hypocrite.

In 1994, the summer after their freshman year in college, Kirsten and Lucy were counsellors at a camp in northern Minnesota. It was coed, and Kirsten was assigned to the Redbirds cabin, girls age nine, while Lucy was with the Bluejays, age eleven. Back then, Lucy weighed probably twenty-five pounds more than she does now, had very short light-brown hair, and had affixed a triangle-shaped rainbow pin to her backpack. The first night, at the counsellors' orientation before the campers arrived, she said, "As a lesbian, one of my goals this summer is to make sure all the kids feel comfortable being

who they are.” Kirsten knew a few gay students at her Jesuit college, but not well, and Lucy was the first peer she’d heard use the word “lesbian” other than as a slur. Although Kirsten took a mild prurient interest in Lucy’s disclosure, she was mostly preoccupied with the hotness of a counsellor named Sean, who was very tall and could play “Welcome to the Jungle” on the guitar. Sean never reciprocated Kirsten’s interest; instead, and this felt extra-insulting, he soon took up with the other counsellor in the Redbirds cabin.

Kirsten became conscious of Lucy’s crush on her without paying much attention to it. Having given the subject a great deal of thought since, Kirsten now believes that she was inattentive partly because of her vague discomfort and partly because she was busy wondering if Sean and Renee would break up and, if they did, how she, Kirsten, would make her move.

Lucy often approached Kirsten, chattily, at all-camp events or when the counsellors drank and played cards at night in the mess hall, and, more than once, she tried to initiate deep conversations Kirsten had no interest in. (“Do you believe in soul mates?” or “Do you usually have more regrets about things you’ve done or things you haven’t done?”) When Kirsten and Lucy ran into each other on the fourth-to-last night of camp, on the path behind the arts-and-crafts shed, when they were both drunk, it was maybe not as random or spontaneous as it seemed, at least on Lucy’s part. Kirsten had never kissed a girl, though she’d had sex with one boy in high school and another in college, and she’s wondered if she’d have kissed just about anyone she ran into behind the shed. She was nineteen, it was August, she was drunk, and she felt like taking off her clothes. That it all seemed especially hot with Lucy didn’t strike her then as that meaningful. They hooked up in the dark, on a ratty red couch, in a room that smelled like the kiln and tempera paint. Kirsten was definitely aware of the variables of there being more than one set of boobs smashed together and the peculiarly untroubling absence of an erection, but there were things she heard later about two girls—about how soft the female body was and how good another girl smelled—that seemed to her like nonsense. She and Lucy rolled around a lot, and jammed their fingers up inside each other, and, though both of them had probably swum in the lake that day, neither was freshly showered. There really wasn’t much in the way of softness or fragrant scents about the encounter. What she liked was how close they could be, almost fused, with nothing between them.

The next morning, while Kirsten was standing by the orange-juice dispenser in the mess hall, Lucy approached her, set a hand on her forearm, and said, softly, “Hey.”

Kirsten, who was intensely hungover and sleep-deprived, recoiled, and she saw Lucy see her recoil. Under her breath, in a hiss, Kirsten said, “I’m not gay.”

If Lucy had done anything other than laugh lightheartedly, that might have halted things. But Lucy’s willingness to act as if neither their hook-up nor Kirsten’s homophobia were a big deal—it made it seem O.K. to keep going. The whole whatever-it-was was so clearly short-lived, so arbitrary.

During the next five nights—the counsellors stayed an extra forty-eight hours to clean the grounds after the kids went home—Kirsten and Lucy were naked together a lot. The second night was both the first time someone went down on Kirsten and the first time she had an orgasm; the orgasm part happened more than once. She was less drunk than the night before, and at one point, while Lucy was lapping away at her, she thought that, all things considered, it was good that it was happening with a girl first, because then when a guy went down on her, when it mattered, Kirsten would know what she was doing.

After Kirsten had basically spasmed in ecstasy into Lucy’s face, she said, “Could you tell I’d never done that?”

It was less that Kirsten was confiding than that, with Lucy, she didn’t feel the need to feign competence. Lucy was lying on top of her, propped up on her elbows, and she seemed amused—flirtatious-amused, not mean-amused—as she said, “Seriously? Never?”

Kirsten said, “Well, I’ve given blow jobs.”

“Then that *really* doesn’t seem fair.”

The sureness of Lucy’s hooking-up personality, the way it might even have been more confident than her regular personality, impressed Kirsten; the nearest Kirsten got to such confidence was when things felt so good that she forgot herself.



Lucy added, “Just in case none of the recipients of your blow jobs ever mentioned it, you’re very, very fun to have sex with,” and Kirsten said, “This isn’t sex.”

As she had by the juice dispenser, Lucy laughed.

“I mean, it’s fooling around,” Kirsten said. “I’m not denying that.”

“You think if there’s no penis it doesn’t count?”

Lucy’s apparent lack of anger surprises Kirsten more in retrospect than it did at the time. Lucy explained that she was a gold-star lesbian, which meant one who’d never had sex with a guy; in fact, Lucy added proudly, she’d never even kissed a guy. Kirsten asked how she’d known she was gay, and Lucy said, “Because, even when I was in grade school, the people I always thought about before I fell asleep at night were girls.”

That what was transpiring between them would be kept secret was both understood and probably not very realistic. Before they lay down on the red couch, Kirsten would block the door with a chair, but sometimes dim figures, other couples in search of privacy, opened the door partway. When this happened, Kirsten would freeze, and Lucy would call out sharply, “There are people in here,” and a retreat would occur. Once, someone very tall opened the door all the way and just stood there, not moving, someone else behind him, and Kirsten realized, with one of her nipples in Lucy’s mouth, that the person in front was Sean, and Kirsten’s fixation with him, a fixation that had lasted until just a few days before, seemed distant. Lucy lifted her head and said in a firm voice, “Can you please leave?” Sean and Renee did go away, but the next morning Renee asked, with what seemed more like curiosity than disapproval, “Was that you with Lucy?”

All these years later, while driving to work and considering ruining Lucy’s life, Kirsten thinks that Renee would be her corroboration, and maybe Sean, too. Conveniently, Kirsten is Facebook friends with both of them, privy to the extremely tedious details of their separate suburban lives.

At the time, fake-casually, fake-confusedly, Kirsten said, “With who?”

That fall, back at school, Kirsten opened her mailbox in the student union one day to find a small padded envelope, the return address Lucy’s, the contents a brief,

unremarkable note (“Hope you’re having a good semester . . .”) and a mixtape. Kirsten was surprised and very happy, which made her inability to listen to the mixtape perplexing; the first song was “I Melt with You,” and the second line of the song was “Making love to you was never second best,” and though she tried several times not to, Kirsten always had to turn off her cassette player after that line. She never acknowledged Lucy’s gift.

The next summer, Kirsten returned to the camp, and Lucy didn’t; someone said that she was volunteering at a health clinic in Haiti. Kirsten had a boyfriend then, a guy named Ryan, who was working in the admissions office of their college and to whom she hadn’t mentioned Lucy.

After that summer, Kirsten’s only source of camp updates was a winter newsletter that she read less and less thoroughly as the years passed. She became aware of the Prairie Wife, in the amorphous way one becomes aware of celebrities, without having any idea that Lucy Headrick was Lucy from camp, whose surname had been Nilsson. But, last December, Kirsten read the newsletter in its entirety. It was the day after Christmas, and she was trying to get Jack to take a nap, which he didn’t do much anymore, but he’d been cranky, and they were due at a potluck in the evening. She was sitting halfway up the steps of their house so as to intercept Jack whenever he tried to escape from his room; she’d pulled the newsletter from a stack of mail by the front door to occupy herself between interceptions.

The camp had been owned by the same family for several generations, and an eccentric great-uncle who taught archery wrote the newsletter. The item about Lucy was just a paragraph and not particularly fawning—“It’s always fun to see what former camper and counsellor Lucy ‘the Prairie Wife’ Headrick née Lucy Nilsson is up to”—but Kirsten couldn’t believe it. Though she didn’t own any of Lucy Headrick’s cookbooks and had never seen her television show, she knew enough about her to find it hilarious. She knew that Lucy Headrick was gorgeous (she had long blond hair and magnificent cheekbones), was married to a man, and was, in some conservative-flavored way, religious. Kirsten was so excited to tell Casey that she let Jack get out of bed. They went into the den, where Casey and Ian were watching football, Kirsten carrying the camp newsletter. But it turned out that, although Kirsten *had* mentioned Lucy to Casey,

Casey had never heard of the Prairie Wife, so Kirsten's ostensible bombshell was less satisfying to drop than she'd anticipated.

That might have been that—a funny coincidence—except that a week later, at the digital-map-data company where she works, Kirsten passed Frank's office while he was watching Lucy Headrick make chicken-and-dumpling soup online. "I'm decompressing," Frank said. "I just turned in a test tally."

Kirsten held up her palms and said, "Hey, no judgment." She almost didn't say it, but then, pointing at the computer screen, she did. "I kind of know her."

Frank raised one eyebrow, which was a gesture Kirsten suspected that he had, in his adolescence, practiced at great length as part of shaping his persona. Frank was her age, the son of Thai immigrants, and he was married to a white guy who was a dermatologist. Kirsten liked Frank O.K.—she respected his attention to detail—but she didn't really trust him.

Frank said, "Do go on."

She tried to think of reasons that not trusting Frank mattered and couldn't come up with any. Once, she had considered her interactions with Lucy to be her most damning secret, but now, ironically, they were probably the most interesting thing about her, even if Casey had been underwhelmed.

"I haven't seen her since the mid-nineties, but we worked at a camp a few hours north of here," Kirsten said, then added, "We slept together a bunch of times."

"No. Fucking. Way." Frank looked elated. He made a lascivious "Mm-mm-mm" sound, and said, "You and the Prairie Wife as baby dykes. I love it."

"Actually," Kirsten said, "I looked it up, and I'm pretty sure Lucy lives about forty-five minutes west of St. Louis. Which, for one thing, that's not exactly the rural farmlands, right? And, also, it's been a while since I took social studies, but is Missouri even a prairie state?"

"She's a fraud," Frank said happily. "A fraudulent butter-churning bitch."

That was three months ago, and, since then, without really meaning to, Kirsten is pretty sure that she and Frank have become close friends. The reassuring part is that, if anything, he monitors Lucy's activities more avidly than Kirsten does—surely his avidity has egged on her own—and Lucy represents ninety per cent of all discussions between them. The unsettling part is that Frank also follows several other celebrities as enthusiastically yet spitefully; Kirsten isn't sure where he finds the time.

**W**hen Kirsten arrives at work twenty-five minutes late, Frank appears on the threshold of her office and gleefully whispers, “There. Is. A. Shit. Storm. Brewing.”

Calmly, Kirsten says, “Oh?” This is the way Frank greets her approximately twice a week. But it turns out that a shit storm *is* brewing: someone on Kirsten's team stored sample data, data belonging to a national courier company, in the area of the server where production can access it, even though the agreement with the courier company hasn't yet been formalized. Their boss, Sheila, is trying to figure out who messed up, whether anyone from production has used the data, and, if so, how to remove it.

As Kirsten steels herself to speak with Sheila, Frank, who is still standing there, says, “Has your copy of your girlfriend's book arrived?”

“I didn't pre-order it. I'm stopping at the store on the way home.”

“Well, as soon as you finish give it to me. Because I am not putting *one penny* in the coffers of that whore.”

“Yeah, so you've said.” Kirsten squeezes past him.

She definitely isn't the one who failed to sequester the sample data, but it's unclear if Sheila believes her. They have a forty-minute conversation that contains about two minutes' worth of relevant information and instruction and thirty-eight minutes of Sheila venting about how at best they've embarrassed themselves and at worst they're facing a copyright lawsuit. When Kirsten has a chance to check Lucy's various Web sites, she finds that they're all filled with book promotions. On Twitter and elsewhere is a selfie of Lucy and the host of “The Mariana Show” in the greenroom; their heads are pressed together, and they're beaming.

After two meetings and a conference call, Kirsten gets lunch from a sandwich place around the corner, and it's while she's waiting in line for turkey and Swiss cheese on multigrain bread that she receives Frank's text: a screenshot from the Web site of a weekly celebrity magazine, with a headline that reads, "Prairie Wife Comes Out as Bisexual." The first one and a half sentences of the article, which is all that's visible, read, "Sources confirm that cookbook writer and television personality Lucy Headrick, known to fans as the Prairie Wife, revealed during today's taping of 'The Mariana Show' that she has dated multiple women. The married mother of three, who—"

Another text arrives from Frank. It reads, "OMFG!"

Back in the office, Frank says, "Do you think she mentioned you?"

"No," Kirsten says, though, since receiving Frank's text, she has felt very weird, almost nauseated.

"What if she's carried a torch for you all this time and she looks directly at the camera and says, 'Kirsten, please make haste to my quaint rural farmstead, pull off my muslin knickers, and lick my evangelical pussy?'"

"Jesus, Frank," Kirsten says. "Not like there's anything private about what I told you."

Her phone rings, and she can see on the caller I.D. that it's Casey. To Frank, she says, "I need to answer this."

"Ian has strings practice after school, and he forgot his violin," Casey says. "I know this is annoying, but could you get it? I have a meeting with the superintendent."

"I don't think I can," Kirsten says. "Sheila's in a really bad mood today. Anyway, maybe Ian should deal with the consequences. You want him to develop grit, right?"

"You think he should just sit there while everyone else practices?"

"I can imagine more traumatizing childhood experiences." Kirsten is nevertheless about to relent when Casey says, "God damn it, Kirsten."

"I thought we didn't swear anymore," Kirsten says. There's a silence, and she asks, "Did you just hang up on me?"

“No,” Casey says. “But I need to prepare for my meeting. I’ll see you at home.”

Which, if either of them, is delivering the violin? This is how Casey wins, Kirsten thinks—by *not* insisting on resolution, which compels Kirsten toward it. On a regular basis, Kirsten wonders if Casey is using middle-school pedagogical techniques on her.

She stewes for the next ninety minutes, until she has to go home and get the violin or it will be too late, then she stands and grabs her purse. Like an apparition, Frank is back in her office.

He says, “If we leave now, we can go to Flanagan’s and watch Lucy on ‘Mariana.’ And I do mean *on*.”

“I’m sure it’ll be online later today.”

“Don’t you want to know if she mentions you?”

Kirsten hesitates, then says, “Fuck it. I’ll come with you.”

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“For realsies? What were you about to do instead?”

Kirsten sighs. “Good question.”

It is seven minutes to three when Kirsten and Frank enter Flanagan's Ale House. Four other patrons are there, two old men sitting side by side at the bar and two younger men sitting by themselves at tables.

Frank gestures toward the TV above the bar and says to the bartender, "Can you change the channel to 'The Mariana Show'?"

"We'll buy drinks," Kirsten adds. But then the thought of returning to the office with beer on her breath makes her wonder if Sheila will fire her, and she orders seltzer water and French fries; Frank asks for a gin and tonic, and when their drinks are in front of them he clinks his glass against hers and says, "To lesbians."

Kirsten has only ever seen clips of "The Mariana Show," and it turns out that there's a lot to get through before Lucy appears—Mariana's monologue, then a trivia contest among audience members, then a filmed segment in which Mariana takes a belly-dancing class. Plus endless commercials. As the minutes tick by, the afternoon is drained of the caperlike mood it had when she and Frank left the office. They speak intermittently. She says, "I don't think she *could* mention me, even if she wanted to. Like, from a legal perspective, since I'm a private citizen. And I'm sure she was involved with other girls."

Finally, after more commercials, Mariana introduces Lucy, and Lucy walks out to energetic cheering and applause. She sits on a purple armchair next to Mariana's purple armchair, and the cover of "Dishin' with the Prairie Wife" is projected onto an enormous screen behind them.

Lucy looks great—she's wearing a short-sleeved, belted blue dress with a pattern of roses—and she's also palpably nervous in a way that Kirsten finds surprisingly sympathetic. Lucy is smiling a lot, but she keeps widening her eyes in an oddly alert way, and she appears to be shaking.

Lucy and Mariana discuss a recipe in the memoir for raccoon stew; Lucy says that she personally isn't crazy about it but that it was given to her by her mother-in-law.

"You weren't raised on a farm," Mariana says.

“I wasn’t,” Lucy says. “I grew up in the suburbs of Phoenix. My dad was an engineer, and my mom was a teacher.” Her matter-of-factness also elicits Kirsten’s sympathy. Even if her fame is country-fried, even if she speaks in a nebulous drawl, Kirsten cannot remember ever seeing Lucy outright lie. “A few years after college, I enrolled in social-work school at the University of Missouri,” Lucy continues. “It was while I was doing field work way out in the country that I met my husband. And that was it for both of us. I never expected to fall in love with a farmer, and he never expected to fall in love with a food blogger.”

As the image on the screen behind them changes from the book to a photograph of Lucy and a handsome man wearing a checked shirt and a cowboy hat, Mariana says, “Something in your book—and it’s a fantastic read—but something that surprised me is before you got married to the Stud in Overalls, as we fondly refer to him, you describe how you dated women.”

Lucy nods and says both matter-of-factly and shakily, “I did, in my late teens and early twenties. I consider myself bisexual.”

“Oh yeah, you do, bitch,” Frank says. “Booyah!”

“Can you not talk over her?” Kirsten says.

Mariana, who Kirsten hopes is feigning naïveté for her viewers, says, “But if you’re married to a man you’re not still bisexual, are you?”

“Well, my husband and I are monogamous, but I think even if your circumstances change your core identity remains. Like, heaven forbid, if my husband passed away I’d still be madly in love with him.”

*Really?* Kirsten thinks. *Madly?*

Mariana asks, “Do you worry about how your fans will react to this news?”

“I love my fans,” Lucy says, and turns and waves at the studio audience, who explode in applause. Though, surely, an audience in Southern California is not representative of Lucy’s base.



Over the cheering, Mariana says, “This is just a hunch, but it seems like they love you, too.” More thunderous cheering ensues.

“Really,” Lucy says. “I gave this serious thought. I prayed on it, I talked to my preacher, I talked to my family. And obviously things are a lot better now for the L.G.B.T. community than they once were, but you still hear about teen-agers taking their lives, or being made to feel like they’re less than. So I decided to let them know, Hey, you’re not alone.”

Kirsten thinks of Lucy at the camp-counsellor orientation in 1994, and then she thinks, What if Lucy *isn't* a greedy, phony hypocrite? What if she’s still herself, as surprised by the turns her life has taken as Kirsten sometimes is by hers? In Flanagan’s, it occurs to Kirsten that she might be witnessing a genuinely important cultural moment, which makes her wish that she were with someone other than Frank.

“I’m so verklempt,” he says. “I need a hug.” She assumes he’s being sarcastic, but when she glances at him he’s teared up for real. He makes a sheepish expression and says in a thick, wet voice, “I can’t believe your girlfriend is ruining my mascara.”

What choice does she have? In her arms, he smells like gin and some leathery cologne, and she’s still holding him when he lets loose with a huge, guttural sob.

“Oh, Frank,” Kirsten says.

**A**fter she leaves work, Kirsten doesn’t stop to buy Lucy’s book. When she arrives home, the boys greet her at the front door.

“Mama, how many tickles do you need to make an octopus laugh?” Jack says.

“I don’t know, how many?”

“I forgot my violin, but Mom brought it to me,” Ian says.

“I hope you thanked her,” Kirsten says.

“You need ten tickles,” Jack says.

In the kitchen, Casey is dumping mayonnaise into a large clear bowl, onto chunks of canned tuna.

“Melts?” Kirsten says by way of greeting, and Casey nods. As Kirsten washes her hands, Casey says, “Will you pull out the salad ingredients? There’s a yellow pepper.”

“I appreciate your getting Ian’s violin.”

“We need to be better organized in the morning,” Casey says. “I’m setting my alarm for fifteen minutes earlier tomorrow.”

“O.K.” After a pause, Kirsten says, “Did you hear that Lucy Headrick came out on ‘The Mariana Show’? Or whatever coming out is called if it’s retroactive.”

“Who’s Lucy Headrick again?”

Oh, to be Casey! Calm and methodical, with a do-gooder job. To be a person who isn’t frittering away her life having vengeful thoughts about people from her past! It happens that Casey is both a former farm girl, of the authentic kind—she grew up in Flandreau, South Dakota—and a gold-star lesbian. She and Kirsten met thirteen years ago, at the Christmas-carolling party of a mutual friend. Kirsten got very drunk and climbed onto Casey’s lap during “Good King Wenceslas,” and that night she stayed over at Casey’s apartment.

“Lucy Headrick is the Prairie Wife,” Kirsten says. “She just wrote a book.”

“Got it,” Casey says.

“She was actually very eloquent. And her fans are definitely the kind of people who are still bigots.”

“Good for her.”

“Are you pissed at me?”

“No,” Casey says. “But I’m trying to get dinner on the table.”

Kirsten puts the boys to bed, then lies down in the master bedroom and looks at her phone. It's difficult to estimate what portion of the tweets Lucy has received this afternoon are ugly—they're mixed in with "Yay for standing your truth Lucy!" and "I love you no matter what!!!" Maybe a third?

"why u like to eat pussy did u ever try a hard cock"

"You are A LESBIAN ADULTERER. You are DISGUSTING + BAD for AMERICA!!!!!"

"Romans 1:26 two women is 'against nature'."

Quickly, before she can talk herself out of it, Kirsten types, "I thought you were very brave today." After hitting Tweet, she feels a surge of adrenaline and considers deleting the message, but for whose benefit? Her three bots? In any case, Lucy hasn't tweeted since before noon, and Kirsten wonders if she's gone on a Twitter hiatus.

In the summer, Kirsten and Casey usually watch TV together after the boys are asleep, but during the school year Casey works in the den—responding to parents' e-mails, reading books about how educators can recognize multiple kinds of intelligence. Sometimes she keeps a baseball or a football game on mute, and the sports further deter Kirsten from joining her. Thus, almost every night, Kirsten stays upstairs, intending to fold laundry or call her mother while actually fucking around on her phone. At 9:45, she texts Casey "Going to bed," and Casey texts back "Gnight hon," followed by a sleeping-face emoji with "zzz" above the closed eyes. This is their nightly exchange, and, every night, for about four seconds, Kirsten ponders Casey's choice of the sleeping-face emoji versus something more affectionate, like the face blowing a kiss, or just a heart.

While brushing her teeth, Kirsten receives a text from Frank: "Bitch did u see this?" There's a link to what she's pretty sure is a Prairie Wife article, and she neither clicks on it nor replies.

She is still awake, in the dark, when Casey comes upstairs almost an hour later, uses the bathroom, and climbs into bed without turning on the light; Kirsten rarely speaks to Casey at this juncture and always assumes that Casey thinks she's asleep. But tonight, while curled on her side with her back to Casey, Kirsten says, "Did you sign Ian's permission slip for the field trip to the science museum?"

“Yeah, it was due last Friday.”

“Oh,” Kirsten says. “Imagine that.”

They’re both quiet as Casey settles under the blankets, then she says, “Did the prairie lady mention you on TV?”

“I probably would have told you if she had.”

“Good point.” Unexpectedly, Casey leans over and kisses Kirsten’s cheek. She says, “Well, no matter what, I owe her a debt of gratitude for initiating you.”

For some reason, Kirsten tears up. She swallows, so that she won’t sound as if she’s crying, and says, “Do you really feel that way, or are you joking?”

“Do you think you’d have dated women if she hadn’t hit on you behind the arts-and-crafts shed?”

“And your life is better because you ended up with me?”

Casey laughs. “Who else would I have ended up with?”

“Lots of people. Someone less flaky and petty.”

“I like your flakiness and pettiness.”

Kirsten starts crying harder, though still not as hard as Frank was crying at the bar. But enough that Casey becomes aware of it and scoots toward Kirsten, spooning her from behind.

“Baby,” Casey says. “Why are you sad?”

“This will sound self-centered,” Kirsten says. “But Lucy was really into me. I’m sure it was partly because I wasn’t that into her, and I wasn’t even playing hard to get. I just—” She pauses.

“What?” Casey says.

“I know we have a good life,” Kirsten says. “And the boys—they’re amazing. They amaze me every day. Did I tell you, when we were at the mall last weekend Jack wanted to buy you this purse that was like a fake-diamond-encrusted jaguar head? Its eyes were emeralds.”

“Oh, man,” Casey says. “I can’t wait for my birthday.”

“It’s not that I’m jealous of Lucy Headrick because she’s a rich celebrity,” Kirsten says. “It seems awful to be famous now.” Her voice breaks as she adds, “I just wish that there was someone who was excited about me. Or that when someone *was* excited about me, I wish I hadn’t taken it for granted. I didn’t understand that would be the only time.”

“*Kirsten.*” Casey uses her top hand to pet Kirsten’s hip.

“I don’t blame you for not finding me exciting,” Kirsten says. “Why would you?”

“We have full-time jobs and young kids,” Casey says. “This is what this stage is like.”

“But do you ever feel like you’ll spend every day slicing cucumbers for lunchboxes and going to work and driving to Little League on the weekend and then you’ll look up and twenty years will have passed?”

“God willing,” Casey says. She moves both her arms up so she’s cupping Kirsten’s breasts over her pajama top. “Do you want me to pretend to be Lucy at camp? Or Lucy now? Do you want me to make you a chocolate soufflé?”

“Soufflé is too French,” Kirsten says. “Lucy would make apple pie.”

They’re both quiet, and, weirdly, this is where the conversation ends, or maybe, given that it’s past eleven and Casey’s alarm is set for six-fifteen or possibly for six, it isn’t weird at all. They don’t have sex. They don’t reach any resolutions. But, for the first time in a while, Kirsten falls asleep with her wife’s arms around her.

In the middle of the night, because she can’t help herself, Kirsten checks to see if Lucy has responded to her tweet; so far, there’s nothing. ♦

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