

tions to Pilar Ternera's sexual "school" are the Segundo twins, who in turn are initiated by Petra Cotes, a latter-day avatar of Pilar. [. . . Her] last act was to advise Aureliano to seduce his aunt. (96)

Not only is this paradise a brothel, but the author has also included his own persona as a part of the fictional experience. The group visiting the Golden Child consisted of Aureliano Babilonia and his four friends from the Catalonian's bookstore, one of whom is Gabriel, whose "great-great-grandfather [was] Colonel Gerineldo Marquez" (419). I can imagine Márquez chuckling to himself as he wrote the passage.

—CARL R. RUNYON, *Owensboro Community and Technical College, Owensboro, Kentucky*

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Munro's HOW I MET MY HUSBAND

Alice Munro has repeatedly described secrecy as crucial to her childhood coping mechanisms (Pfaus 2; Ross 19), as well as to her early self-identification as a writer and her initial writing efforts (Gibson 246; Ross 19, 55). Thus, it is not surprising that, as Stephen Regan has observed, "the stories of Alice Munro are frequently shaped by the discourse of lies and secrets [. . .]" (123). Others have emphasized the importance of secrecy in Munro's fiction (Dahlie 23–24; Foy 160; Noonan 144), including Munro herself (cited in Ross 21). Yet, remarkably, writers discussing this theme never seem to apply it to perhaps Munro's most frequently anthologized story, "How I Met My Husband." Throughout this story, problems result when characters disclose their own private information or try to gain access to that of others, and good things result when characters discreetly withhold information.

Early in the story, we encounter our first example of the damage resulting from indiscriminate public disclosure. Edie, an adult narrator recalling an adolescent experience, describes her "disgrace" when the local newspaper

printed the averages of all of the area's high school students, with hers being the lowest average of all, 37 percent. In response, her father pulled her out of school, and she ended up living away from home, working as a "hired girl" for the Peebles family when she was only fifteen (47).

Eddie initially succeeds at this job, partly because she selectively withholds information. Accustomed to eating larger meals than those served in the Peebles household, she smuggles in boxes of homemade doughnuts. When the children find out, she is careful to "bind them to secrecy" (48). But she is also capable of keeping secrets from the children. When a barnstorming pilot named Chris Watters lands near the Peebles's home and begins taking area residents on rides for a dollar, Eddie is asked if she would like to ride. As a character, she replies noncommittally, but as the narrator she confides to the reader, "I was scared, but I never admitted that, especially in front of the children" (46). Similarly, after Eddie has met Chris and he refers to a time she accepted a cigarette from him, she "made a face to hush him, because you never could tell when the children would be sneaking around the porch, or Mrs. Peebles herself listening in the house" (54).

In fact, Eddie's entire relationship with Chris is rooted in secrets they jointly withhold from others, as well as in information she withholds from him. They first meet when Eddie, left alone in the house, has tried on Mrs. Peebles's best satin dress and makeup and is accidentally observed in this elaborate costume by Chris (50). They begin to grow close because Eddie, realizing that this violation of her employers' personal possessions could get her fired, crosses the road to Chris's tent and tells him, "I wisht you wouldn't say anything about that dress" (52). After Chris promises to keep her secret, he asks her opinion of an advertising sign he has spent much of the day creating. As narrator, Eddie tells us, "The lettering wasn't all that handsome, I thought. I could have done a better one in half an hour." But as character, she tells Chris, "It's very good" (53). He promises to keep her secret, she flatters him while keeping her true opinion private, and the two of them begin to bond.

The less sympathetic characters in the story, on the other hand, lack any sense of privacy or restraint. A neighbor, Loretta Bird, is an overbearing gossip who eagerly tells the Peebles family everything she knows about Chris (46). In contrast to Eddie's commonsensical discretion, Loretta asks Eddie, "[D]id [Mr. and Mrs. Peebles] fight and did they keep things in the dresser not to have babies with?" (47). (Eddie, characteristically, "pretended not to know what she was talking about," thus maintaining privacy for both herself and her employers.) Later, "swollen up with pleasure" over being present during a conversation in which Eddie's sexual innocence is being questioned, Loretta volunteers that "[t]here was a bad woman here in town had a baby that pus was running out of its eyes" (62-63). Partly because of her disregard for privacy, Loretta emerges as a cartoonish, contemptible figure.

Another unsympathetic figure, Alice Kelling, shows a similar lack of discretion. Whereas Chris has been around for several days without ever mentioning any emotional commitments, when Alice arrives she immediately introduces herself as “Mr. Watters’s fiancée” and describes when and how she met him (55–56). This openness only subjects her to tactless comments from Loretta (“You’ve had a long engagement”) and Mrs. Peebles (“He never mentioned his fiancée”) (56). Worse, it alarms the commitment-phobic Chris, eventually causing him to literally fly away.

Whereas Alice’s public openness drives Chris away, Edie’s discreet, secretive nature attracts him. When Edie visits Chris in his tent a second time, on an errand for Alice and Mrs. Peebles, the secrecy motif recurs in reversed form: this time, it is Chris who asks Edie to keep quiet about potentially compromising information. After saying “I’ll tell you a secret,” he reveals his plan to fly away before Alice returns from a picnic that evening (59).

It is at this point, when Edie and Chris are both keeping a secret for the other, that the two have a sexual encounter. One could, of course, interpret this secret, and secrecy-bonded, tryst negatively—after all, Chris is an experienced adult whereas Edie the character is a naive fifteen-year-old. But Edie the narrator, a perceptive adult observing through the lens of hindsight, repeatedly uses the word “lovely” to describe the encounter. Although Chris’s treatment of Alice Kelling is clearly less than admirable, his behavior is consistently honorable in the secretive encounters with Edie in the tent. Edie describes his actions as in no way exploitative (“[S]uch kindness in his face and lovely kisses [. . .] and he did some other things, not bad things or not in a bad way [. . .] and he said, ‘I wouldn’t do you any harm for the world’”), and she makes clear that when their passions begin to heat up even slightly, he is the one who stops them from going further (60). This encounter appears to have been the romantic apex of Edie’s life. And although Chris does not turn out to be the future husband referred to in the story’s title, without this sexual encounter Edie never would have met her husband—to whom she remains married, presumably happily, in the story’s present. The secrecy between Edie and Chris has had wonderful consequences, both romantic and conjugal, for Edie.

Chris’s secret is, of course, safe with Edie. When she finally tells Alice that Chris has left, she lies about his destination “to give him more time” (61). Edie the narrator says, “You’d think I’d be ashamed of myself, setting her on the wrong track” (61). But this wording clearly implies that even with hindsight, she *is not* ashamed, although she acknowledges that “[w]omen should stick together and not do things like that” (61). At any rate, the deception does not seem to harm Alice beyond what she already suffers for pursuing a man who flies from commitment. And because the deception goes undiscovered, it causes Edie no problems at all.

What *does* cause Edie problems is her honesty when she acknowledges that she baked a cake for Chris, stayed to visit after delivering her message, and was “intimate” with him (62). These disclosures lead to a harrowing attempt to violate her privacy. After Edie reveals that she thought “intimate” simply meant kissing, Alice and Mrs. Peebles begin arguing about whether Edie had sex with Chris. Finally Alice, mortified at being publicly rejected by Chris and seeking an outlet for her anger, says to Mrs. Peebles, “Well there is one way to find out. After all, I am a nurse” (63). But Mrs. Peebles wisely rejects the course of action Alice implicitly suggests. Critic Gerald Noonan has observed that Munro’s fiction “suggest[s] that too close an examination of ‘other people’s secrets’ is unwise” (144), and this observation certainly applies to the examination Alice Kelling has in mind.

The concluding paragraph clarifies why the story is called “How I Met My Husband” and simultaneously provides one last example of the value of secrets. Because Chris promised to write a letter telling Edie where he was so she could come to him, Edie waits by the mailbox every day for months. The letter never comes—but the mail carrier becomes friends with Edie, asks her out, and eventually they marry. Even after years of marriage, she has never told her husband that she was waiting by the mailbox for a letter from another man: “He always tells the children the story of how I went after him by sitting by the mailbox every day, and naturally I laugh and let him, because I like for people to think what pleases them and makes them happy” (66). It is a perfect conclusion to Munro’s story, a story that exemplifies the old saying, “What they don’t know can’t hurt ’em.”

—BRIAN SUTTON, *University of Wisconsin–Green Bay*

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