

Chautauqua



T.S. Gray

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If I were to pick up this book, I'd want to know what kind of men this author has in her life. If you could only see, you'd envy me above any woman you know. I am three times blessed: by Tim, my husband, who is the foundation of every good thing in my life, by Kevin who lights my writing fire with the precision of a laser, and by Michael, who believed in me before I believed in myself. With gratitude, this book is dedicated to you.

Contents





The book you are holding bears little resemblance to my initial vision. When I began work on these stories, I thought I was writing a novel. But as I wrote, I fell in love with the people who live in this sleepy southern town. Instead of writing a single story made up of chapters and scenes, I found myself writing a series of short stories. Characters stroll in and out of the background, only to crop up later in a story of their own in this place that seemed more like a town I was discovering than one I was creating.

I've always been fascinated by the hidden currents and eddies that form in the depths of small town life and nowhere do those currents flow with more strength than through our erotic fantasies and the sexual decisions we make. So I indulged myself by peeking in windows, watching whose car was parked where overnight, and listening to the couple in the booth next to mine when I went out to dinner. I uncovered stories of love, family, sex and life. Life that is more sensual, more daring, and more interesting than it appears on the surface.

I hope that you too will enjoy these glimpses beneath the ordinary surface routines of Chautauqua.

T S Gray



Emma Walters leaned back in her chair and clicked the icon on her desktop for the game of blocks. Line up a single color by deleting the other color blocks, see how many you can get to touch, then click. The blocks disappeared and the score rolled up. The best was when she could make a large section of red blocks, the green and blue ones stood out against the red and she could eliminate them easily. Oh, yes, 23,000 points for that one.

The phone rang. "Walters' Realty, Emma Walters speaking."

"Emma, this is your mother."

"Hold on, Mom, Two more lines and I finish this report." Emma rolled the receiver down into her shoulder and turned the sound off her speakers. Two more lines, and there, she cleared level 14. "Okay, Mom. What's up with you today?"

"I've just come from the pharmacy."

"Are you feeling well? I thought Dr. Johnston said it was just a head cold."

Emma wondered if her Mom would hear the keyboard clicking. She could clear Level 15 before her concentration was broken.

"Oh, it wasn't anything really. I just stopped by to pick up vitamins."

"Vitamins? Mom, you have a whole cabinet full of vitamins that you don't take. Who else was at the pharmacy today?"

"Now that you mention it, Clyda Nelson was there harassing that poor little Stevens girl about arthritis medication. Clyda no more has arthritis than a Bessie bug. She just wants attention. To hear her tell it, she can't stand the pain. It's her fingers, then it's her shoulder, then it's her knee."

Emma smiled at "poor little girl." It didn't matter that Cynthia a 36-year-old pharmacist, in this town she'd always be the poor little Stevens girl. "Maybe it's just not obvious arthritis, Mom. Not everyone is a hypochondriac."

"Oh, I know that, but you can't tell me that Clyda isn't the biggest put-on in town."

Emma briefly considered arguing a bit with her Mom just for the entertainment. But in truth, Clyda was the biggest 'put-on' in town. "Well, what did Clyda know today?" Clyda complaining about ailments wouldn't be worth a phone call. Emma figured that her Mom was really annoyed because someone had beaten her to a bit of prime gossip.

"Well, Clyda said she had just seen Sharon Ashcraft in the Piggly Wiggly. Sharon said that there was a moving van in front of the old Johnston house this morning."

"Really?" Emma clicked to pause her game and leaned back in her chair.

"Yes, really. Now Emma, you know who's moving in. Why haven't you mentioned it?"

“How about client confidentiality, Mom?”

“Pffft, you’re a realtor, not a psychiatrist. So who is it? Who bought the Johnston house?”

Emma looked over at the photo still posted on her bulletin board. The Johnston house boasted gingerbread trim, and a round turret sitting area off the master bedroom. Emma had lusted for the giant claw foot bathtub in the antique tile room from her first walk-through of the property and still thought if she couldn’t have the house, she’d like to have that bathroom. She wondered if the new owner had seen it yet. “Just someone from Atlanta, that’s all I know.”

“Atlanta, someone from Atlanta moving here? That’s backward. As long as I can remember people have been leaving here for the big city. He must have family in the area.”

“I don’t think so. Anyway, it isn’t a man. It’s a woman. A single woman. I think she’s a teacher.”

“Oh, that’s a shame.”

“Why do you say that, Mom?”

“Oh, no one could keep up that house on a teacher’s salary. It’ll be all she can do to make the mortgage. Probably has a head full of nonsense about how it’s cheaper to live in a small town.”

“People get all kinds of strange notions, don’t they?” Emma smiled again. “Isn’t today Tuesday?”

“That’s right, first Tuesday of the month, I’ll have to run if I’m not going to be late to the Women’s Missionary Lunch. You have a good day Emma.” That lunch didn’t start for another hour and a half at least. Mom just wanted to make a few more phone calls before she left to fill in her friends on the information she thought she’d gleaned with subtlety.

Emma restarted her game, but lost after a few more moves. It never fails, after an interruption you just can’t get back into the groove. It was only 10:00, but the phone wasn’t ringing off the hook with business. Flipping the sign to “out,” she closed the door behind her without locking it.

Sure enough the big gold and white moving van sat under the spreading oak in front of the Johnston house. Two men carried boxes and tables up the steps to the wide porch. A young woman met them and inspected each load. “This will go upstairs to the master bedroom, that one goes to the kitchen.”

On the way into the house, one of the movers almost tripped over a large orange cat. The man muttered something under his breath while the cat strolled onto the porch. He sprang up to the seat of a wooden rocker and curled up. Taking advantage of the break, Emma called out, “Sarah?”

The woman turned, “Yes?” From her voice on the phone Emma was expecting someone thin and delicate, maybe a blonde version of Scarlett O’Hara with her southern drawl. This woman bore no resemblance to Vivian Leigh. Of average height, with honey brown hair, and peachy skin, she wouldn’t have attracted any attention on the street. She wasn’t thin enough to be beautiful, nor plump enough for pity. She was just average.

“Hi, I’m Emma Walters.” She held out her hand. “I heard that the moving truck had arrived so I thought I’d come by and introduce myself. Since we’ve talked on the phone so much, I wanted to put a face with your name.”

“Emma, hi!” Emma’s first impression of a rather plain woman died as the smile transformed Sarah’s face. Under the spell of that smile no one would notice if her hips were a little too round or her chin too square. Emma felt a twinge of almost jealousy. “You have been fantastic. Thank you for all your work making this easy on me.”

“I was just doing my job. Earning that commission.”

“It’s more than doing your job to help me line up interviews with the school district. That was exceptional and I really appreciate it.”

“No problem. Did any of them work out?”

“Well, I was really hoping for a position at Chautauqua High School, but it looks like I’ll be making the commute to Tupelo until one opens up closer.”

“You won’t be alone. Most of the people in Chautauqua commute to Tupelo these days. I can get you the names of a couple other teachers going that direction if you’re interested in carpooling.”

“Thanks I’d appreciate that.”

“No problem. Have you thought of anything else I could help you with.”

“Who do I see for a cell phone? The one I had doesn’t seem to work here.”

“That’s easy, you check in with Susan over at the MovieTyme Rental Gallery. She handles cellular service on the side.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Oh, no, we’re real big into that killing two birds with one stone thing around here. The best pizza in town comes from the Murphy’s gas station, and you’ll have to call the hardware store if you need new annuals for your flowerbeds.”

Sarah laughed. “This place is going to be way more interesting than Atlanta. Imagine all those years I just dialed the boring old pizza place and had my dinner delivered by a kid with a ratty old car.”

“Oh, we find plenty to interest us, too. For example, I happen to know that the prime topics of conversation at the Ladies Missionary Luncheon today are your leather sofa and Bobby Turners appendix operation.”

“I know you’re kidding about the sofa. I haven’t even seen anyone other than a jogger until you showed up.”

“Oh, no. Sharon Ashcraft drove by here about an hour ago. She ran into Clyda Nelson, Clyda saw my mom at the pharmacy, and here I am.”

“That’s bizarre.”

“No, that’s a small town.”

“You know, I lived in the same house for over five years in Atlanta, I couldn’t tell you the names of more than a half dozen of my neighbors.”

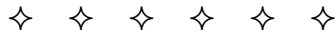
“Well, honey, it won’t be that way here. I can even tell you who the jogger was. Navy shorts, gray tee-shirt, early 30’s, dark brown hair, a little thin on top, and the kind of delicious backside any red-blooded woman would want to sink her teeth into?”

“I’m afraid to ask how you know that. Was I ogling your husband?”

“Oh, no, Girl. Eric Walters has a happy little beer belly and no inclination to sweat in public. Your jogger was Jake Williams. He’s been divorced for long enough that I know several women who are hoping he’s ready to date again. And wait ‘til you see his brother Jim. He’s a carpenter, and when he straps on a tool belt, every old lady in town finds a reason to drive by.”

“Speaking of my happy husband though. I guess I need to run. I’m planning something special for his birthday and I need to get started if I’m going to get it done in time.”

“Well, it was very nice to meet you in person, Emma. I hope you and your husband have a good evening.”



Emma stood before the mirror on the back of the bathroom door with the razor in one hand and shaving-cream can in the other. How ... exactly? She looked over at the photo in the magazine. The model had a completely hairless pubic area except for a thin line that widened into an arrow just above the labia.

Emma looked back at herself. There were significant differences between herself and the model even apart from the artful shaving of the genitals. Emma estimated that she was at least fifteen years older than the air-brushed nymph. In addition to the effect of time and gravity, the stretching and shrinking of her form to accommodate the growth and development of babies had left marks as well.

She wondered. How far back should she try to put the shaving cream? It wasn't perfectly clear from the photo but she didn't really expect that there was a matching arrow in the rear ... unless it was a tattoo. She shuddered. If that was the case, she hoped Eric never saw the picture.

Birthday presents were supposed to be things like a new cordless drill, or a fancy dinner out while Mom watched the kids. This year she'd thought that since he was turning 40 she'd do something above and beyond. When she found the magazine with the story about Las Vegas, she was inspired. For months she saved to make that dream come true. Only, it hadn't gone the way she planned when she brought up the subject last night.

She leaned against the doorway of their bedroom and watched her husband propped on his pillows reading financial news.

"Honey, I've been thinking about your birthday."

"Um, hmm?" Eric rustled the newspaper.

"Come on, Honey. I'd like to talk to you about this."

"Just a second. I want to see about the new stock they're putting in the 401k." He folded the page and copied figures into the small notebook he kept in the drawer of his bedside table. "Now, you were saying something about my birthday."

"I just thought that since this year is special, well, I want to give you something special to mark the occasion."

"That sounds great, do you have anything particular in mind?"

"Well, I know we haven't talked about it. We probably don't talk about these kinds of things often enough. But I know there's something you've wanted for a long time, and well, this year for your birthday, I want to give it to you."

"What do you mean Emma?"

"I found this when I was putting away your clothes. I didn't mean to be prying, but, well, I saw it and I got thinking that if that's what you really want ..." She drew the magazine from behind her back.

"Oh, my God. I can't believe you'd do that for me."

Emma smiled. "I do love you, Honey. I want you to be happy."

Eric reached out his hand and she passed over the glossy paper with the photomontage of the big casinos on the Vegas strip. He glanced down at it and then back up at her face.

"You know, you don't have to do this. I'd be happy with anything you wanted to give me."

She nodded. "I know that, but I really want this year to be special."

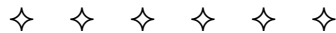
"Wow, I never expected ... will you need my help?"

"No, I've been planning this for a while and I want to take care of everything myself."

He raised an eyebrow. "If you're sure ... I don't want you to hurt yourself. I mean, if you've never done something like this, I imagine it would be really easy to slip." He flipped the magazine open to a photo spread of a young blonde. "I don't know how you guessed, I suppose it's really a juvenile thing to wish for ... But a night of making love with you completely shaved. I've been dreaming of this for years."

Emma's mouth fell open. Eric didn't notice the look of shock. He drew his finger across the page. "God, Emma, just the thought of you like this." He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Wanna come over here, Little Girl? I have a piece of candy . . ."

Emma went into his arms. Hot whispers of praise and love combined with the skilled play of his hands across her body to coax a familiar melting response. Within minutes she lay beneath him. Her legs wrapped around his waist as she thought to herself, "Shaved?"



Well, if I'm going to do this I might as well get on with it. Emma propped her foot on the side of the bathtub to expose her privates. She sprayed a palm full of shaving cream and began to spread it across herself. Looking in the mirror she giggled at the sight. It looked like she had used enough to probably shave her entire body and maybe the dog, too. Lord in Heaven, the silly things we do to ourselves.

She wiped her fingers on the damp towel that she had felt so clever for thinking to have handy. Then it was time for the razor. Still watching her reflection she reached back and drew the blade up along the side of her foam covered folds.

"Shit!" Stinging pain betrayed her mistake even before the foam turned pink. Grabbing the towel, she pressed it against the cut. Just imagine next month at her annual check-up. Old Dr. Apple would say, "What happened to you?" and she'd have to answer, "I cut myself shaving." She dissolved into giggles over the scene.

Oh, man, what do I do now? She looked around the room for inspiration and her gaze landed on the lighted make-up mirror she'd been using since college. Laying it down on the floor, she flipped the switch. With the light and the magnification, the view from this angle was funny too. And yet. She spread her knees and bent down. It had been a long time since she'd seen another woman naked, and she'd never seen any woman this way, including herself.

She reached back again with the razor and pulled it forward through the cream. The strip of rich pink skin surprised her. In her imagination the pink color was all inside the folds. She rinsed the razor and drew it up the other side. All desire to giggle fled as she saw her secret places exposed for the first time.

Even when she had completed the task and washed away the lingering flecks of cream, she remained in position over the mirror. Sliding her fingers down, she gently opened herself. Deep and mysterious this geography of her body called to her. One finger disappeared inside then emerged shiny. This was the fountain from which her children had emerged. This slickness was the water of life.

With her other hand she pushed back the little hood to reveal the nub at the apex of her sex. So small and innocent, it too glistened. She stroked it lightly and felt the responsive tug in her womb. The fingertip drew it around in a circle and she felt her nipples become firm. This was it. This was the center that called all her body to attention.

Oh, my God. What am I doing? She stood quickly. The woman who met her eye in the mirror was not the same woman who'd been there earlier. This woman wore a knowing smile. She had seen things about herself, things that were beautiful. This woman understood things about power and strength and life. She would never want to trade places with the untried and airbrushed child in the photo. This woman would never need an arrow like a little girl playing dress-up.

As Emma dressed the fabric of her clothing brushed against the cut reminding her with a gentle sting. Surprising warmth followed the sensation. She felt the twinge again when she bent to move Eric's shoes so she could vacuum. This time the warmth came with a tingling companion. Standing before the kitchen sink, she twisted to reach for a scouring pad and felt the slide of her underwear across smooth skin. Her whole body hummed with secret energy generated by the new sensations.

Emma was decorating Eric's cake when her mom arrived to pick up the kids.

"I thought you'd be disappointed about not going to Vegas for the weekend, but you seem happy."

"I didn't even tell him about Vegas, Mom. He asked for a quiet evening at home." Color rose in her cheeks and she thought, well it's not exactly a lie. "I'll tell him later and we can go to Vegas when he has a chance to enjoy the anticipation. I don't want it to all come and go before he realizes what's happening."

"You went to a lot of trouble to cover the office for this time off. In fact, James is very impressed with you. He told me when he hired you that he wasn't sure it was going to work out having family in the office, I think he was afraid you'd take advantage. But I knew you'd do a good job."

"It probably helps that I'm his niece-in-law instead of a blood relative, I don't have a long history of him putting worms down my shirt or seeing him do stupid stuff when he was in college to make me disrespect him now."

"Well, are you sure you won't change your mind? You know I'd love to keep the kids for a week. In fact, I've been looking forward to it."

"We'll work something out, Mom. I do still want to take the trip."

"You're sure that Eric has no idea what you'd planned?"

"Oh, I'm sure, Mom. But this way he'll get what he wants and then we'll have the trip later, maybe for our anniversary."

"You are a good wife to him."

"He's a good husband to me."

"Well, like I said, you do seem happy, and younger. Have you cut your hair?"

Emma smiled, "No, I haven't changed it. I don't know what the difference is." She was saved further discussion when the kids came in from school.

"Oh, here's my special sweetheart!"

"Grandma, Grandma!" Amid shouts, hugs, and promises to Emma that they would be good even while they begged their Grandma for permission to stay up late, the kids exchanged their backpacks for overnight bags and flew out the door.

"Have a good evening, Sweetie. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Emma laughed at her Mom's wink. She watched from the door and waved as they backed out of the driveway.

"I already have, Mom. I already have." ...



T S Gray credits her childhood spent in a small southern town with having sparked a life-long fascination with quirky characters and the currents beneath the surface of quiet lives. After living in large cities for fifteen years, she is back living in and writing about small town life. She says, "Small town life is very different from suburban life. It's a disappearing social system in which manners and relationships are vital to a person's chances of success. Love in a small town carries its own special burdens and benefits, paradoxically because it is more necessary to preserve privacy and yet it invariably is a matter of public interest."

Watch for the expanded version of Chautauqua coming in print. Contact the author at [T.S. Gray](#). Or visit her weblog at [Love Secrets](#).

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