

**The First Two Pages: “Lust to Love” by Jessica Laine**

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Edited by Holly West (Down & Out Books)

I knew the general plot for “Lust to Love” but wasn’t sure about my opening paragraph. When I get stuck, I like to steal from the best (lol). Reading the 2017 Agatha-nominated short stories (the 2018 finalists are posted at the Malice Domestic website at [malicedomestic.org](http://malicedomestic.org)), I stumbled across Barb Goffman’s story from the anthology *50 Shades of Cabernet*, “Whose Wine Is It Anyway?” which had a great opening: “I’d given the man forty years of my life, and he was replacing me with a husband-hunting hussy.”

This sentence immediately answers the question: What is the problem/conflict? The first paragraph of my story (about a young woman named Lulita who may or may not be a husband-hunting hussy) is a riff on this opening line:

Being a trophy wife isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. I’ve given my husband the best year of my life and in return, he’s been playing hide the salami with some skank. When I find out who he’s sleeping with, there will be hell to pay or my name isn’t Lulita Conchita García de Bergen.

The rest of page one is backstory on Lulita’s husband, Jim; Jim’s deceased wife, Rosemary; and Jim and Lulita’s brief courtship:

I met Jim twelve months ago while I was a junior at Rice College in St. Paul and working part-time at Second Chances, a used sporting goods company. At first, I didn’t know much about him other

than he was in his forties, resembled Captain Stubing from *The Love Boat*, and liked to look down my shirt while I typed up documents for him. One day, I asked my girlfriends, Fawn and Sherry, about Jim.

Fawn looked at me like I was nuts. “Jim Bergen? He owns the company, airhead.”

*A-ha.* “What’s the deal? Is he divorced?”

“He was married but his wife, Rosemary, died last year.”

“From cancer?”

Sherry glanced around the cafeteria. “A boating accident on Lake Minnetonka. It was freaky, Lulita,” she whispers. “She slipped over the boat railing and her body was never found.”

“Did you ever meet her?” I asked.

“No,” Sherry said, “but she used to work here.”

“What did she do?”

“She worked in the typing pool, just like us. After they were married, she did a lot of charity work. I heard she was raised in an orphanage and wanted to give back.”

Fawn chimed in. “Anyway, Jim’s single now, and I think he likes you. Why wouldn’t he? You look like a Spanish Belinda Carlisle.”

“Aww, thanks.” I’d caught Jim staring at me like a man who was drowning, and I was the only one who could save him. It was both cool and creepy.

When I was single, the fun was in the capture and the kill, and let’s face it, old Jim was easy prey. I wore low-cut blouses until he worked up the nerve to ask me out. While we were dating, he never mentioned Rosemary. We married six months later.

Page one ends with a mention of Jim’s boat:

At Jim’s insistence, I quit my job.

“You’ve been working too hard. Let me take care of you, Lulita,” he said.

There was something appealing about handing over the reins to my older, handsome husband. My days are spent tanning, Jazzercising, or enjoying the views from our McMansion on Lake Minnetonka. An empty boat slip sits at the edge of the property.

When I asked Jim, what happened to the boat (the one Rosemary was on when she died, I wanted to add), he said, “I donated

it to the fire department. They sunk it as a training exercise. It's at the bottom of the lake."

Lake Minnetonka is not a shallow body of water. At its center, it's about 115 feet deep. Still, the thought of Jim and Rosemary's boat somewhere out there—close to the house—creeps me out.

Page two begins with Lulita and her friend, Fawn, day drinking and discussing the haves and the have-nots:

One afternoon, I invite Fawn over for drinks. We sip piña coladas on the patio as the sun sets on Lake Minnetonka.

"Wow, this is the life," Fawn says. "Let me know if Jim ever needs another wife."

"I will," I say, glancing at Fawn's floral Ship 'N Shore blouse which barely hides the bulging waistband of her leggings.

"Not that he'd want me," Fawn says. "The Jims of the world only marry women who look like you."

I tell Fawn that it's not true, but later I wonder if it is.

The rest of page two reveals the growing sense of isolation Lulita faces as a trophy wife and the deteriorating state of Jim and Lulita's relationship:

"How was your day?" Jim asks me during dinner.

"Good. Fawn came over."

"She did?"

"Yeah, she said if you ever need a new wife, she's game."

Jim's smile seems forced.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"It doesn't look good for my wife to be associating with my employees."

"I don't have many girlfriends."

"You'll make more friends."

"Women don't like me." It's true. You should see their faces as they look me up and down.

We sit in silence for a while until Jim says, "I was thinking you could drop out of school."

"Why?"

“Beautiful girls like you don’t need an education, Lulita. College is for ugly girls like your friend, Fawn.” Jim chuckles at his own joke.

“Many women my age attend college, Jim.”

“Rosemary didn’t.”

Finally. For the past year, I’ve been waiting for him to say her name.

“I’m not Rosemary.”

He bangs his fist on the kitchen counter, startling me. “Listen, I didn’t marry you for your brains. I married you because you have a great rack and a pretty face, and don’t you forget it.”

“I won’t.”

“If you need me, I’ll be in my office.”

I watch as Jim huffs and puffs his way down the basement stairs. Like a cannibalistic humanoid underground dweller, Jim spends most of his time below ground. I think he keeps his porn stashed in his office because the door is always locked. He’s probably in there right now, whacking off.

If Jim thinks he’s going to keep me from going to college, he’s got another thing coming. The last people who told me a high school degree and my pretty face were “enough,” my parents, died in a tragic house fire during my senior year of high school.

I hope my first two pages will make readers wonder: Why won’t Jim mention Rosemary? What *is* Jim doing in the basement? Did Lulita’s parents *really* die in a tragic house fire?

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Jessica Laine writes contemporary crime fiction with a Latinx twist. Her work has been published in *Literary Mama*, *Women’s Memoir*, and *The Norwegian American*. Jessica is the winner of the 2017 Sisters in Crime Eleanor Taylor Bland award and the 2016 Mystery Writers of America-Midwest Hugh Holton award. For more information on her work, go to <https://jessicaellislaine.com/> or follow her on Twitter at @msjessicalaine.