

THE ABSOLUTE TRUTH MACHINE

KATHERINE HEINY

Once, after we stayed out all night drinking and then went to Denny's for breakfast and drank two entire pots of coffee between us, my college roommate Samantha and I came up with the idea for an Absolute Truth Machine. The basic concept was that there was this machine which knew what everyone was thinking and feeling all the time, and recorded it, and you had five opportunities over the course of your lifetime to ask it questions.

"You should write a novel about it," Samantha said, her eyes shining and her voice made nearly rapturous by caffeine. "Everyone would read it. People would have meetings and clubs and things, all dedicated to choosing their five questions."

Then she all of a sudden got sleepy and began rubbing her eyes with her fists, and I could barely get her back to our apartment.

The idea for the novel stayed with me for a long time, though I never got around to writing it. I described it once to a famous writer and he thought it sounded like a bad science fiction book. He said that if I wrote it, no one would respect me as a poet anymore. I'm not sure anyone respected me as a poet *anyway*, but at the time I was awed by the writer's fame. I was also sleeping with him and I took everything he said seriously.

So I never wrote the novel, but I still thought about the Absolute Truth Machine sometimes, Right now, for instance, I tell my husband about it and ask him what his five questions would be.

“Well,” he says, “my first wish would be that there was a Math Channel with pretty girls solving —”

“Not wishes,” I say impatiently. “Questions.”

He considers. “Can the machine predict the future?”

“No.”

“Can it answer big universal questions, like is there life on other planets?”

“No, it’s more for personal stuff.”

He narrows his eyes. “How does the machine collect the data?”

“It’s imaginary,” I remind him.

“I still don’t see how it would work, though,” he says. “And that bothers me.”

It’s not always easy, life with a mathematician. Perhaps I should have married another poet. My husband is all distracted by the mechanics of the Absolute Truth Machine when he should be thinking about his five questions. Because figuring out how to use them well and wisely requires the bringing together of a lot of abilities: timing, intuition, prioritization. Sort of like archery, maybe, or having an affair, or getting all the elements of dinner ready at the same time. Not that I’m good at any of those things. The potatoes at our house are always underdone.

#

The day that the idea for the Absolute Truth Machine occurred to us, an art professor called Samantha up and asked her if she’d like to come to his house

and meet this well-known cartoonist named Fritz who was passing through town.

Samantha said she'd love to and then hung up the phone and was immediately seized with guilt because she had a serious boyfriend, Matthew, and felt she shouldn't be meeting other men, at least not on purpose.

We spent a long time debating the likelihood of a man named Fritz being attractive and decided the odds were pretty low, or at least low enough that Samantha didn't have to feel guilty. So off she went and came back with the news that Fritz had bucked the odds, he was sexy in addition to being a well-known cartoonist and she was madly in love with him. Also, he was leaving town the next day. So Samantha went over to Fritz's hotel and told him that she couldn't stop thinking about him. Fritz said she should give him her number and he would fuck her if he ever came back through town (I'm paraphrasing here). Samantha and I went out and got very drunk and spent a lot of time talking about it.

We went out to breakfast at Denny's, and we meant to do a little studying, since it was finals week, but instead we took naps for a few hours. When we got up, there was a note under the door from one of our neighbors saying that he thought an electrical appliance in our apartment had a fault and it was interfering with his ham radio and he wanted to come over with some device and search for it.

"Oh, God, it's probably my curling iron," Samantha said immediately.

"Well, I'm not giving it up."

"What do you suppose he does on the ham radio all the time?" I asked.

We had a long discussion as to whether it would be worth having the neighbor come over for the comic value of it, and by the time we decided

(regretfully) that he sounded entirely too strange, it was time for Samantha to go to her job at the frozen yogurt shop.

She left, after making me promise to stay off the phone in case Fritz called. I walked down to the supermarket. It was twilight when I walked back and I stopped to have a beer with the guys next door who were sitting in lawn chairs outside their apartment. I went in to use their bathroom and showed them that their oven had actually been on BROIL instead of BAKE all year and told them that's why everything they tried to make came out scorched.

Then I went back to my own apartment and saw there were three messages on the machine, which I listened to while I put away the groceries. One was from Matthew, asking Samantha to call him; one was from Fritz, saying he wanted to make sure he'd written her number down right; and one was from the ham radio guy, asking if we'd gotten his note.

It's so strange to me, even today, when I think that Samantha was already dead by the time I heard these messages. I still find it hard to understand that for hours while I thought she was alive, she was dead; that Fritz and Matthew and the ham radio guy meant nothing to her while they still meant something to me.

#

My husband and I go out to dinner and while we are at the bar having cocktails, he tells me that he's been thinking about the Absolute Truth Machine and he knows what he'd like to ask it. Which is a very nice thing about him, how he remembers stuff you're sure he's forgotten.

“Well,” he says, “I’d like to know what my first wife thinks of me.”

It’s hard to keep a straight face when he says this because to even the most casual observer it must be clear his first wife wishes he were dead instead of married to me.

“Second,” he continues, “I’d like to know if I really did prove the Four Color Map Theorem when I was in college, before they did it with computers.”

It’s sort of tempting to ask him what the Four Color Map Theorem is, but that might lead us into a long conversation I’d regret. Then again, there are lots of topics these days that might lead us somewhere we’d both regret.

So I ask and it turns out that there’s a theorem which states that on any given map, the regions can be colored using at most four colors so that no two adjacent regions have the same color. Possibly there’s a bit more to it but by that point, I was onto my second martini and not paying all that much attention.

“What about your other three questions?” I ask, interrupting.

“That’s it,” my husband says. “About everything else, I’d rather not know.”

We are quiet for a moment and then he says, “I’ve never met anyone else who can go from sober to drunk in the space of two drinks.”

So we leave the bar and go into dinner and my husband drinks wine but I don’t. We talk about my students and his students, and whether we should put slug poison in the back yard or will the dog eat it, and where my stepson should apply to graduate school, and has my husband noticed the Volvo is making a sound like a cough, to the extent cars can cough. All sorts of other stuff, the kind of conversation which rushes in to fill the vacuum after you get married and don’t talk about your relationship all the time any more.

#

When I was twenty-four, I lived for a while with a very famous best-selling crime writer, who was sixty-four. He had a beautiful penthouse apartment on the Upper East Side, and we lived there together with his secretary, Mrs. Morganstein, who was also sixty-four.

Actually, Mrs. Morganstein didn't live there, it only felt like she did. She arrived promptly at eight every morning, which was before we got up, and began working on her computer in an alcove off the living room. Shortly after that, the famous writer would begin working on his computer in the study, and I would begin typing noisily on my old Olivetti electric typewriter in the guest bedroom.

We all three worked separately, Mrs. Morganstein on correspondence, the writer on his novel, and me on poems and letters to friends, until noon, when we met in the dining room and had whatever lunch Mrs. Morganstein prepared. Over lunch, Mrs. Morganstein and the writer discussed the morning's correspondence, or if there wasn't much of that, they discussed his children and her children (who were all older than me, every single one) while I looked out of the window, which had a spectacular view of the East River.

Afterwards, if the twice-a-week housekeeper was not there, I washed the dishes. It had been somehow made clear to me early on that, as a poet, I had the lowliest rank in the apartment, and therefore dishes were my job. I often wondered who did the dishes before I came along, but I was careful never to ask.

In the afternoon, we all went back to our respective typing, and it was sort of like working in a very small office or typing pool, except that two of the people in the office were desperate for the third person to go home so they could have

sex. Which, of course, may be the case in offices the world over. Anyway, finally, Mrs. Morganstein would finish up and leave at about 3:30, and the writer and I would have sex for a long time — he was sixty-four, so it *took* a long time — often in the living room, with Mrs. Morganstein's computer looking on disapprovingly.

In the evenings, I put on high heels and one of the two dozen low-cut black dresses the writer had bought me and we went out to dinner. About half the time, it was just the writer and me, and I would have a good time and fall a little bit back in love with him, to the extent that I was ever in love with him. He could be very charming, and we would discuss the plot of the book that he was writing and sometimes I would make suggestions and he would actually incorporate those suggestions into the book, which I found insanely exciting, and it wasn't until much later that I realized the books were the only reason I was with him.

The other half of the time, we would go out with friends or business colleagues of his, and hardly anyone talked to me during these dinners, except to occasionally ask me how the writer and I had met. I learned to keep my eyes on whoever was talking and make it look like I was following the conversation, but actually all I did was listen for one sentence of any interest, which I would use as the first line in a poem the following day. This was almost always a waste of time, although once some woman said about her husband, "He makes the most fabulous cassoulet," and the husband turned to her and said, "Is that what you think about when you think about me?" The poem I wrote based on that was no good at all, but I still think it's a great first line — the husband's, not the wife's — and it's about a hundred times better than what I got most nights.

#

My stepson comes over one night for dinner and I ask him about the Absolute Truth Machine and ask what his five questions would be.

Before he can answer, my husband says quickly, "Do you know what the Four Color Map Theorem is?"

It turns out that my stepson doesn't know and when my husband explains it to him, and says that he think he may have proven it back in college, my stepson laughs and says, "Yeah, but there were a lot fewer countries back then, so it was easier."

But he's actually interested enough to get paper and some ancient crayons and he and my husband spend a happy half-hour coloring maps while I clear the table and wash the dishes. My stepson comes into the kitchen just as I'm finishing and leans against the counter, watching. He has always liked to see me doing domestic activities. I think it makes him feel like I'm going to stick around permanently.

"I can only think of one question," he says finally. "I would want to know if Julie Meyers really liked me in high school, or if she was just using me to make some other guy jealous."

High school! Even when I was in high school, everyone's motives were so obvious, it was like they had them printed on their t-shirts. In fact, I think I'd better make some addendum that you can't ask the Absolute Truth Machine anything until you're twenty-one, and even then, no questions about high school.

“She really liked you,” I say. “After you left for college, she used to come over and have dinner with us sometimes. She wouldn’t have done that otherwise.”

He shrugs. “That’s still my question, though.”

I start the dishwasher and walk over to where my stepson is standing, picking grapes out of the fruit bowl and staring out the window.

“Look at the sunset,” he says. “The sky is beautiful.”

“It looks like lavender metal,” I say softly.

He laughs. “You should be a poet. Anyone ever tell you that?”

#

Here is what happened to Samantha: she was unlucky.

There’s a longer version of the story, of course, but the shorter one also works. She was unlucky. For most of her life, her luck had been good, and then one night it was bad. And one night was all it took. All the lucky years before, all the years of good luck with boyfriends and poetry contests and English papers and looking sexy in black and the other things that were important to Samantha and me — in the end, they were all undone by one single moment of bad luck.

I know because about five years later I was working as a clerk at a newspaper, covering the police blotter, and I learned how to read a police report. And that’s when I realized just how unlucky she was.

#

One night after I'd been living with him for five months, the famous writer told me that we were going to have dinner with a couple who had won a "Dinner with Your Favorite Author" contest his publisher sponsored. The writer was happy because we would be having dinner with fans and because we got to eat at 21 and his publisher would pay for it.

So I put on my lowest-cut black dress and my highest high heels and we went to 21 to meet the contest-winning couple, Jim and Marilyn. Jim was a soft freckled man in his forties, and Marilyn was in her thirties, with very dark hair cut in a Cleopatra bob. I remember being amused that between us, we had four decades represented.

I endured the usual awkwardness of them thinking I was the writer's assistant or daughter up until the moment he introduced me as his girlfriend. (There was always, always, a beat of silence after this happened. I'd like to meet another couple with a forty-year age difference and compare notes on this, but so far it hasn't happened.) Jim asked what I did for a living and I said, "I'm a poet," which I had found by then to be an extremely effective conversation-stopper. I settled back into the leather booth and started drinking.

And then in the midst of a conversation about liquid paper (they were discussing writing long-hand, and whether anyone actually wrote that way anymore) something very strange happened: suddenly I knew that the writer was going to call Marilyn the next day and ask her to meet him at a hotel. I did not suspect this, or intuit it, or deduce it. I *knew* it. I knew it the way you might wake up in the middle of the night and know an intruder was in your kitchen.

I did not intercept a glance between them, or witness a covert touch, or notice him laughing too hard at her jokes. I just knew it. I would like to say that

as the dinner progressed, I became more certain of it, but the fact is that I was perfectly certain from the first second, and the knowledge sat in my chest like a hot sticky ball of tar.

I stopped drinking and sat up straighter. I did not leave the dinner table once that evening. I did not finish my appetizer and I didn't touch my main course. But I saw nothing untoward. At no time would it have been possible for her to give him her number, but I knew he could get it from his publisher, or more likely, Mrs. Morganstein, being wildly detail-oriented, would have it neatly stored in her files.

Mainly I sat there and remembered a time the writer had called one of my poems "slight" and wondered if I'd been as furious with him then as I was now.

After dinner, we put Marilyn and Jim in a cab and began walking around the corner to where the car and driver were waiting. I turned to the writer and said, "I know. I know you're going to call her."

He stopped walking. "Call who?"

"Marilyn!" I nearly shrieked.

"Why would I call her?"

"The usual reason," I said and began walking again.

The writer began walking, too. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I can see you're upset but I don't know what I've done —"

"It's what you're *going* to do," I said. "And don't bother telling me that you're not going to do it because I know you *are*."

We got to the car and the driver jumped out to open my door. The writer went around to the other side of the car and opened his own door. But I didn't get in. I just took off my high heels and threw them in the back seat. "I'll walk

home," I told the driver. I slammed the car door and began marching up Fifth Avenue.

The writer caught up to me. "You're going to cut your feet on glass, walking like that."

I didn't slow my pace. "Then you'll have the chance to call Marilyn while I'm in the ER getting stitches."

The writer made an exasperated noise. "You're being irrational."

"Irrational but right," I said.

"Look," the writer said. "I don't know where you got this idea that I would call Carolyn."

Now if he'd said "Marilyn," I might have let myself be persuaded by him, at least for a little while. But saying "Carolyn" instead of "Marilyn" was so like him, so indicative of the way his mind worked, so similar to something he'd have a character say, so *writer-like*, that I knew instantly that I was right.

"You forget sometimes that I'm a writer, too," I said. And I didn't speak to him again all the way back to the apartment.

In the bedroom, I stripped off the black dress and my nylons and threw them in the corner. The writer, thinking I was getting ready for bed, sat down and began untying his shoes.

I went to the closet and pulled on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

"What are you doing?" the writer asked.

"What does it look like?" I answered. I stood on one foot, then the other, slipping on an ancient pair of Keds. They felt heavenly after five months of high heels.

The writer put his head in his hands. "Please," he said. "You know I have to work tomorrow." This was something he said whenever we argued late at night.

"Then you'd better get some sleep," I said.

And I left. I packed my toothbrush and a nightgown and all my poems and my Olivetti typewriter. I took a cab downtown and checked into the Martha Washington Hotel for Women and stayed up all night writing a villanelle about a girl who can't find the right shade of lipstick, which turned out to be a pretty good poem. Then at five in the morning, I walked over to a Cuban diner on Thirty-First Street and ordered a platter of fried plantains and a cafe con leche. It was a beautiful morning, already warm, and the diner smelled like cinnamon, and I remember that the waitress wore beautiful opal earrings. The adrenaline from the fight with the writer and the sense of accomplishment from finishing a poem, combined with sugar from the plantains and the caffeine from the coffee, created a good feeling, almost like happiness, or maybe it was happiness, and it lasted all that day, and a little longer.

#

My stepson spends the night in the guest room and in the morning, he tells us he's thinking about going to Italy. My husband says, "When you were three, you got lost in Venice and your mother and I spent ten horrible minutes thinking that gypsies had taken you."

"You could have used the Absolute Truth Machine to find me," my stepson says.

“Yes, and I would have,” my husband answers. “Although we eventually found you playing under some street vendor’s cart.”

“Can you really only ask it five questions in your whole life?” my stepson says, turning to me. “Can’t it be like a really expensive helpline that could call as much as you wanted, as long as you had a credit card?”

“Nope,” I say, taking a sip of my coffee. “Five times is it.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Well, I guess I’d save all my other questions in case something like that happened to my child or to someone else’s.”

This is so characteristic of my stepson, of how sweet and gentle and dutiful he is. If a friend or relative ever called him and asked him to use one of his questions to find their missing child, he would never have to say, *Sorry, I just used my last question to find out what everyone said about me in the break room when I wasn’t around.* I might have to do that, but he wouldn’t. For the first time, it occurs to me that I risk losing my stepson, not just my husband, with what I’m doing.

“What did Samantha think?” my husband asks. “What were her questions?”

“We never got that far,” I say. “She helped me come up with the idea but she didn’t choose her questions before — her time.”

I almost said “before she died” and then I changed it. But “before her time” is almost worse in a way. She had her time, it was too short, and now it’s over. Really, there’s that little to say about it.

And there, sitting in the kitchen, I have the feeling I’ve had more and more lately, that something is wrong with the world. Samantha is dead. She’s been dead longer now than she was alive, and much longer than the three years she

was my best friend. The famous writer is dead, too, and probably Mrs. Morganstein, and no one is left who remembers the penthouse apartment, and what it was like there. Something really is wrong with the world. Maybe it happens to everyone, but that's not much consolation. My friends and lovers are dying; and I am almost old.

#

I never saw the famous writer again. We spoke a few times, bitterly, on the phone, but I never went back for my high heels and dresses and very extensive lingerie collection. I imagine he had Mrs. Morganstein donate them to charity, assuming the Salvation Army takes sexy underwear, or else he just threw them out. I read about him in magazines sometimes and heard the occasional radio interview. His books did well, and he got married, to someone nearer his age. Years later I was in a Starbucks and saw on the CNN news ticker that he had died, age 78. I really didn't feel much of anything, other than an insane urge to tell the Starbucks girl taking my order that one of my former lovers had died of old age. (Actually, two of my former lovers have died of old age, the other one being an elderly composer I met at an artists' colony in Vermont in the wintertime and there wasn't much else going on, believe me.)

I thought about him sometimes though. I thought about how I saw in the *Village Voice* that he was having a book signing and I decided I would go to meet one of my favorite authors and I wound up living with him and how that made me feel like anything was possible. I thought about how he taught me that unless you get up and start writing in the morning, you're not a writer, you're just a

person who plans on writing something in the very near future. I thought about how he told me once that he had already written his final book, to be published posthumously, in which all his characters were killed so that no hack could continue his work, and how I said without thinking, “Oh, I hope I don’t have to read it for a long time!” to which he said dryly, “Me, too.” I thought about how the first time he met me at a hotel, he was so excited and distracted that he, a native New Yorker, completely forgot about the existence of Central Park and thought he could walk from the East Side to the West Side in ten minutes. I thought about how sometimes during sex he used to cup my face and look into my eyes the whole time. I thought about how he could have a conversation with anyone, and how he couldn’t bear to watch a movie he’d already seen, and how he got upset if the phone rang during a meal. But mostly I thought about that night at 21 and Jim and Marilyn and wondered if he did call Marilyn the next day, and did he meet her, did he have sex with her, did he look in her eyes the whole time, but mainly was I right, was I right, *was I right?*

This would be one of my five questions.

#

Here is the longer version of what happened to Samantha. I don’t tell it often. Some of it I know from police reports and witness statements and the rest I know just because I knew Samantha better than anyone else in the world knew her. She died at a point in her life where her most meaningful relationship was with her roommate. Sometimes that seems to me like the saddest part of the whole thing.

So this is how it goes. That night Samantha says good-bye to me and leaves our apartment at about 7:30 p.m. Outside, she has a choice between going left or right, either way will take her around to the front of the building. But the ham radio guy lives to the left and she doesn't want to risk having him pop out of his apartment and demand that she relinquish her curling iron, so she goes right. She passes the guys on the other side of us, the ones who are just putting out their lawn chairs and starting to drink beer. They say hello to her and watch her walk by. Men always say hello to Samantha, she of the curly black hair and the long dark eyelashes.

She walks around to the front of the building and here she must decide between a short bus ride or a long walk. But it's a beautiful evening in mid-May, and she doesn't mind walking. (I moved away as soon as finals were over and I never went back, but if I ever do, I'd like to walk from our old apartment to the frozen yogurt shop. I'd like to move through the air and space Samantha traveled on the last night of her life.)

So she walks, thinking about finals and how much studying she needs to do. She thinks about Matthew and how meeting Fritz made her realize that she doesn't want to be with him anymore. She thinks about Fritz and wonders if he is her future, or even a limited part of her future, if she will ever see him again.

She arrives at the frozen yogurt shop, and takes over from the girl who worked the four-to-eight shift. Samantha likes working there. It's a good job, a really good job, as far as part-time college jobs go. The manager is pretty humane and you get to see lots of your friends and eat all the frozen yogurt you want. Though Samantha found that after about two months, she couldn't taste the flavors anymore, she could only taste the cold. It isn't like working at the

pizza place or the doughnut shop, where all the drunk people come in and hassle you after the bars shut. Samantha and I discussed it for hours, the way we discussed everything, and we decided yes, it was a good job, and she was lucky to have it.

It's a slow night in the frozen yogurt business, but that's okay with Samantha. She sits behind the counter and reads *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* in preparation for the British Literature final. She re-reads "Kubla Khan" and thinks about the night she stayed up until one in the morning memorizing it for class and wanted to call the stupid professor wake him up when she finally did it.

Two students, a boy and girl, both aged eighteen, come into the shop at about 8:30 p.m. Samantha looks up from her book and smiles. The girl orders plain vanilla frozen yogurt in a cup, and from this, Samantha knows they are on a first date. Girls on first dates always order plain vanilla, probably so they won't seem greedy, and no sprinkles or other topping which might get stuck in their teeth. Samantha has also discovered that old people almost always order maple or caramel, and women in their forties show up in droves when the flavor is espresso. Samantha has a whole bunch of other theories about what your choice of flavor reveals about you and she plans to write a poem about it when she can decide on the right structure.

The couple eat their frozen yogurt at the table outside the shop, even though there is nothing to look at except the empty parking lot. They leave about 8:50 and Samantha waves good-bye.

Then she closes the Norton Anthology on her finger and looks at the phone. She would very much like to call the apartment and see if Fritz has called, but what if she calls at *precisely* the same time Fritz is calling and her call goes

through and his doesn't? Such things have been known to happen. Oh, but she would so much like to know. She looks at the phone and almost against her will, her hand reaches for it.

The jingle of the bell over the door interrupts her. A man has entered the shop. The man is not remarkable, not very different from any man who might come in, except for one thing: he has a gun. Samantha is shocked by the sight of the gun, and upset, and dismayed, but she is not in fear for her life. She is twenty-one, about to graduate from college, and going to set the world on fire with her poetry. She's going to live through this. Every single particle of Samantha believes that to be so.

The man has a canvas bag and he shoves it at her and tells her to put all the money from the cash register in it. She does this willingly, gives him whatever a whole day of people buying frozen yogurt for a dollar-fifty a pop adds up to.

She hands him the bag and backs away from the cash register. But the man doesn't leave. He looks at Samantha for a long time and then he looks at the phone. She knows suddenly that they are thinking of exactly the same thing: the way her hand was reaching for the phone. She wants to explain to him that she wasn't about to call the police, she only wanted to know whether Fritz had called. If only she can get that sentence out, if only she can make him understand —

The man shoots the phone, which explodes into a hundred pieces of black shrapnel. Samantha screams, she can't help it, the sound of the shot was so loud, so scary, and the man turns and shoots her in the stomach. She drops to the floor, banging her chin on the edge of the freezer, and now she's quiet. Now she doesn't make a sound.

That is as far as I can go. Oh, I can imagine the sights and sounds: the footsteps of the man as he ran from the shop and the squeal of his tires as he drove away, the green-and-white floor tiles with their grayish speckles so close to her eyes, the bite of a fragment of the phone into her cheek, the harsh lemon smell of the industrial floor cleaner filling her nose and throat. All of that is very clear to me. But what she was feeling? The pain and the fear and the panic and the hope — I can't go there. Even for Samantha, I can't go there.

#

For a long time after I left, I didn't read the famous writer's books anymore. Then one day a few years after I got married, for reasons I don't really remember, I started again and found that I could still enjoy him as an author, that I could almost forget I'd ever had a personal relationship with him. Although sometimes, even years later, I would come across a character in one of the books, usually a girl from the Midwest, always a strawberry-blonde, with either my first or middle name, and this character would state an opinion or use an expression that was one of mine. They were always likeable characters, though always very young, sometimes even teenagers.

My husband finds it amusing that I still read the famous writer's novels. "Good book?" he will ask innocently. "Does that one mention Around-the-World?"

This always makes me laugh, and appreciate again that my husband is the least possessive, least jealous person in the world. I love him. Yes, I'm doing something that would make him desperately unhappy, but that's not about love.

It's not just about sex — it's more complicated than that — but it's not about love. I have never, at any point, loved my husband even a little bit less.

#

The bullet went through Samantha's stomach and shattered her spine, paralyzing her from the waist down. But she didn't die right away because there were marks on the floor. She was trying to pull herself toward the back room, where there was another phone.

No one else came into the shop for four hours, until the manager drove past at one in the morning and wondered why all the lights were on. He was the one who found Samantha and she was dead then. It was just more of her bad luck that night that no one came in before, when they might have helped her. You would think someone would have gone out for frozen yogurt as a study break, it being finals week and all.

They never caught the man who killed her. I used to think I would ask the Absolute Truth Machine who he was, but I don't care about that anymore. He's probably dead, or in prison for something else. And he didn't really know what he was doing. He didn't know he was killing the person who pointed out to me that both Lord Byron and Dr. Seuss wrote in anapestic tetrameter. I wouldn't dishonor Samantha's memory by using one of my questions on him. He doesn't deserve it.

I did a little research on gunshot wounds later, specifically gunshot wounds to the stomach with a forty-five, and I found out that it's one of the worst ways to die, if you believe that some ways are worse than others, which I do. The

victim can survive for up to an hour and a half without medical attention. Then they die of blood loss but first digestive acid from the stomach leaks and begins eating away at the other organs. The pain is unimaginable.

So I'd like to ask the Absolute Truth Machine how quickly Samantha lost consciousness. I'd like to know if it was after five minutes or ninety-five, because in these circumstances, I think there's a big difference. I think of the phone in the back room sometimes, and I'm heartened by it. Surely, if she'd still been conscious, she'd have dragged herself to it. But maybe she got tired. Maybe she lay there for a long time, waiting to hear the tinkle of the bell over the door and cursing the fact that drunk people don't crave frozen yogurt. Maybe she kept thinking someone would come. Maybe she *tried* to stay conscious, despite the pain, because she thought someone would come. I don't like the uncertainty. So I'd like to know how quick it was. Though I know no matter how quick it was, it wasn't quick enough for her.

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I get home later than I planned to and call out quickly to my husband as I run past the kitchen, "Pour me a drink and I'll be right in."

But in the bedroom, instead of changing, I sink down onto the bed, suddenly exhausted by the thought of making conversation with him. The feeling of despair is on me now, stronger than ever. How can I explain that I know what's wrong with the world and it's all my fault? That I didn't mean for it to happen, I just somehow never got around to stopping it? Would he understand that at first it made me happy and now it makes me sad, but I still

don't stop? That I thought I'd crossed over years ago into the territory of married and respectable people, but it appears that I didn't. Or else the threshold was lower, easier to step over than I thought, and you could cross back at any moment without actually realizing it.

"You're late," my husband says from the doorway. His voice is kind, not suspicious. He holds a glass of wine out to me. I feel so sorry for him. Doesn't he know that you can't trust poets, that they'll betray you for the right *word* sometimes?

I take a sip of my wine and try to smile.

"You're flushed," my husband says. "Where have you been?"

I think about the night he said that he didn't have any more questions for the Absolute Truth Machine, that he'd rather not know anything else. I want to know if he meant that. This actually would be the perfect moment to use the Absolute Truth Machine, a perfect example of why it really should exist. I would ask it that right now, even if it meant using my very last question. I'd ask how much he wants to know. Because how else will I know what to say to him?

END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Author: Katherine Heiny
Country of residence: United States of America
Nationality: American
Mother tongue: English



Katherine Heiny's stories have been published in *The New Yorker*, *Glimmer Train*, *Ploughshares*, *The Southern Review*, and many other publications, presented on *Selected Shorts*, and performed off-Broadway. She now lives in Washington D.C.

with her husband and two children. Together with them she previously lived in England and the Netherlands.