
FICTION

THIRTEEN WIVES

BY STEVEN MILLHAUSER



I have thirteen wives. We all live together in a sprawling Queen Anne house with half a dozen gables, two round towers, and a wraparound porch, not far from the center of town. Each of my wives has her own room, as I have mine, but we gather for dinner every evening in the high dining room, at the long table under the old chandelier with its pink glass shades. Later, in the front room, we play rummy or pinochle in small groups, or sit talking in faded armchairs and couches. My wives get along very well with one another, though their relation to me is more complex. People sometimes ask, "Why thirteen wives?" "Oh," I always say, putting on my brightest smile, "you can't have too much of a good thing!" In truth, the answer is less simple than that, though the precise nature of the answer remains elusive even to me. What's clear is that I love my wives, each alone and all together, and can't imagine a life without all of them. Even though I married my wives one after the other, over a period of nine years, I never did so with the thought that I was replacing one wife with a better one, or abolishing my former wives by starting over. Never have I considered myself to be a man with thirteen marriages but, rather, a man with a single marriage, composed of thirteen wives. Whether this solution to the difficult problem of marriage is one that will prove useful to others, or whether my approach will add nothing to the sum of human knowledge, is not for me to say. I say only that, speaking strictly for myself, there could have been no other way.

Here, then, are my wives.

1.

Absolute equals, heart-sharers, partners in love—that's how we think of each other, my first wife and I. If, on a Sunday morning, I wake up late to find she's made me a plate of big blueberry pancakes, just the way I liked them as a boy, with a square of butter melting its way in, then the next Sunday I'll serve her a two-egg omelette with green peppers and chopped onions, exactly the kind she remembers from summers at the cabin on the island when she was a girl. I remind her of her appointment with the hair-

dresser on Tuesday at one, she makes sure I don't miss my dentist's appointment on Thursday at four; I drive with her to her mother's house in Vermont on the third weekend in July, she comes with me to my father's house on the Cape for the second week of August; I praise the trim lines of her new yellow sundress, she's pleased by the crisp look of my new light-weave button-down. These arrangements are perhaps known to every marriage, but ours has developed more intimate refinements. If my first wife catches her hand in a door, I howl with sudden pain; when I'm thirsty, she gulps down a glass of iced limeade; if I knock into a table edge, a purple bruise shows on her leg; if she trips on the edge of the rug, I fall to the floor. One evening I thought of the answer to a crossword clue we'd both been stuck on the day before; when I entered her room, I found her sitting up in bed, folded newspaper in hand, filling in the answer with a yellow No. 2 pencil. Another time, when things weren't going well with me, I woke in the night and feared she might be suicidally depressed; when I rushed into the hall, I nearly collided with her, hurrying toward me with her arms held wide and a look of rescue in her eyes. Sometimes, it's true, I grow bored, deeply bored, with our system of finely measured equivalences. Then I long for an imbalance, a sharp exception, a fierce eruption. Unhappy that I've had such thoughts, and uncertain what to do, I seek out the one person who's sure to understand; when I seize her arms and look into her eyes, I see the same melancholy, the same longing for something unknown; and as I burst into a dark, uneasy laugh, I hear, all over the room, like the cries of many animals, the sound of her own troubling laughter.

2.

When I am feeling hopeless about my life, when my hands hang from my sleeves like dead men dangling, when, catching sight of myself in a plate-glass window, I turn violently away, but not before I've seen myself turn violently away, then I know it's time for me to be in the company of my second wife, who knows how to com-

fort me. Even as I arrive at the front door, holding my leather laptop case in one hand and reaching for my key with the other, she's looking at me anxiously and asking about my day, she's helping me out of my belted trenchcoat and hanging up my hat, she's placing my case by the umbrella stand. Already she is leading me to an armchair—my favorite one, with the thick armrests—where she places a pillow behind my head and touches my forehead with her hand, while at the same time she's lifting my feet onto the hassock, she's removing my shoes and pressing her cheek against my leg. "Are you all right?" she asks, looking at me with tender concern. And gazing at me earnestly she asks, "Have you had a hard day?" Later, when she has undressed me, and bathed me, and laid me on the bed, she bends over me and says, "Do you like this?" and "Do you like this?" Still later, waking beside her, I feel a sudden doubt. Roughly I shake her awake. Staring into her sleepy eyes, I tell her that I could never endure a rival, that I'll leave her instantly if she ever tries a trick like that, she can't take advantage of me, I wasn't born yesterday. During my outburst her large, startled eyes fill with tears. Gradually a relief comes over me, I grow calm, I glance at the clock and see that it's getting late, a yawn shudders through me, and as I close my eyes and begin to drift toward deep, soothing sleep I feel her lying awake beside me, searching for the cause of my distress, rehearsing the events of the past few hours, reproaching herself for not loving me enough, her eyes wide, her heart racing, her cheek resting tensely against my shoulder.

3.

At other times, in a more robust mood, the sort of mood in which life's little disappointments no longer seem evidences of failure but welcome challenges to the all-conquering spirit, I seek the company of my third wife, who never spoils me. When I enter her room I find her lying on the bed, reading a book with a frown of concentration. Without looking up, she raises a rigid finger as a sign that she's not to be disturbed; her whole body tightens with attention as she continues reading. After

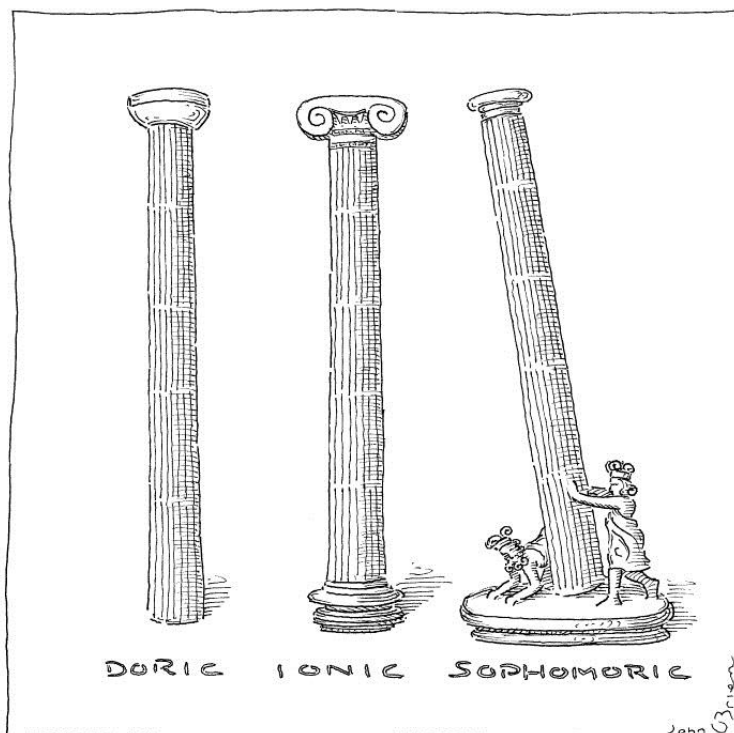
a long while she lays the book on her chest and lifts her eyes to me, with the same frown. At once she reproaches me with having neglected her. As I begin to defend myself, she tells me that the new cleaning lady has broken one of the blue wineglasses; there's no more sliced turkey in the refrigerator, only sliced ham; the door of the linen closet doesn't close properly. I assure her that I'll take care of everything soon, right away, at this very moment if necessary; in response she rolls her eyes in a slow, exaggerated manner. Suddenly she looks at my shirt and asks whether I went to work with my collar like that. Have I checked my hair in the mirror lately? Her head hurts; her allergies are killing her; she's sure she has a sinus infection; there's no air in the room; the window is stuck again. I step over and raise the window easily. She asks whether it gives me pleasure to score a cheap victory at her expense. She's short of cash; her blow-dryer is broken; something's wrong with the switch on the coffeemaker. As I lie down cautiously beside her, she sits up and says it's getting late; besides, she isn't feeling

well; she can't breathe; there's no air in the room, even with the window open; what she needs is a dehumidifier; why doesn't she have a dehumidifier; a dehumidifier would make all the difference. I reach out and touch her arm. She stares at my hand and remarks that she hates her blouse—everything sticks in this weather. Slowly, watching her carefully, I begin to undo my shirt. She's not in the mood, she says; besides, I don't care about her; all I care about is myself; she can't even remember the last time I told her I loved her. "I love you," I say at once. She looks at her fingers and asks whether I really believe that I can make our problems go away just by uttering a few words that cost me nothing; but that's just like me. As she removes her blouse she notices her upper arm; look how the flesh jiggles; she's turning into a tub of lard. I assure her that her arm is fine, very fine, even somewhat on the thin side. She's curious to know when it was that I became the world's leading expert on the diet and fitness of American women. As we continue undressing, she complains about the mattress, which is supposed

to be a medium but is actually much softer than advertised; it's bad for her back; we ought to return it and get a good one, unless, of course, I think this is the sort of mattress she deserves; as we make love, she notes the squeaking springs and reports that the cleaning lady arrived fifteen minutes late and neglected to dust the base of the table lamp beside the couch. When we're done she says, "You never take me anywhere." Before I can answer, she asks how I can expect her to sleep through the night with a windowpane that rattles in the slightest breeze. I never pay attention to her; I don't listen; I talk, but I don't listen; she can't breathe in this room; there's nothing to eat in the house; her neck hurts; she doesn't like the way the new cleaning lady looks at her. Her eyes are slowly closing; she glares at me sleepily. After a while I rise with caution, slip into my clothes, and take my leave, feeling refreshed and invigorated after such exercise.

4.

All's well between my fourth wife and me; really, nothing could be better; in fact, I have no hesitation in saying that our love is perfect; but isn't this very perfection a cause for concern? When she declares herself supremely happy and swears she has never loved anyone as she loves me, I experience a deep happiness of my own; but doesn't my happiness cause me, to a certain extent, to take things for granted, doesn't it nudge me, however minutely, in the direction of smugness and self-satisfaction, and don't these qualities render me, when all is said and done, less lovable? My fourth wife conceals nothing from me, reveals with utter trust the innermost ripples of her being, but in the act of loving self-revelation isn't there a risk that she will gradually deprive herself of mystery? I can't imagine any woman more desirable than my fourth wife, whom I stare at tirelessly, for her beauty, though flawless, is never cold. But doesn't her beauty contain the danger concealed at the core of all extreme things, the danger of provoking irritation or resentment? In the same way, mightn't it be said of her intelligence, her kindness, even her goodness of heart, that they encourage a search for



flaws, that they incite in their admirer a secret craving for ignorance, confusion, and spiritual failure? Our love is perfect; I desire nothing more. Why then should I find my thoughts turning toward imperfection? Why should I sometimes dream of complaining bitterly, shouting at the top of my voice, accusing her of ruining my life? Why should I long to provoke, in the clear eyes of my fourth wife, the first shadow of disappointment and pain?

5.

Whenever I want to be with my fifth wife, I find her in the company of a young man. He's handsome in a boyish, somewhat delicate but by no means unmanly way, slender but well muscled, dressed always in a dark sports jacket, a light-blue shirt open at the neck, and jeans. He is polite, self-effacing, and silent. When my fifth wife and I have lunch together in a downtown restaurant, facing each other across a small table, he sits to her left or right; when we talk at night by the fireplace, he sits on the rug with his head leaning against her leg; when I take off her clothes, she hands them to him; when we slip into bed, he's there beside us, lying on his back with his hands clasped behind his neck. At first his presence disturbed me, and filled me with bitterness, but in time I've grown used to him. Once, waking in the night beside her, I saw over her shoulder that he wasn't there; I felt anxious and shook her awake; and only when, smiling faintly, she lifted the covers to display him lying between us in his dark sports jacket, light-blue shirt, and jeans, sleeping soundly with his head between her breasts, did my anxiety subside enough to permit me to fall back to sleep.

6.

Always, when I'm with my sixth wife, a moment comes when she rises slowly toward the ceiling, where she remains hovering above me. "Dear," I plead, falling on my knees, "won't you come down from there? I'm worried you'll hurt yourself. And besides, what have I done? I didn't disturb you as you sat at the kitchen table with your sketch-

book and your stick of charcoal and drew seventeen versions of a fruit knife lying beside a green pear and a white coffee cup. I didn't clear my throat loudly or walk up and down humming to myself as you leaned back on the couch with your legs tucked under you and twisted a piece of hair slowly around your finger while reading 'Anna Karenina' for the eighth time. I didn't step up behind you and kiss you with a wet smack on the back of your neck while you sat fiercely erect at the piano practicing over and over the first movement of Mozart's Piano Sonata in A Minor, Köchel 310. And if I've allowed my eyes to stray for a moment to your glittering knees beneath your dark wool skirt, it was only in order to rest from the judgment of your intelligent, severe eyes." "Idiot!" she replies. "Do you really think I can hear you from up here?" And with that she begins to fly back and forth across the ceiling, laughing her tense, seductive laugh, brushing my hair with the tip of her foot.

7.

Whatever I like to do, my seventh wife likes to do. When I mow the lawn on a warm Saturday afternoon, admiring the straight strips of fresh-cut grass as bursts of sweet-smelling blades fall at my cuffs, she walks alongside me, clasping the left half of the black rubber grip on the red lawnmower handle. When I read a mystery novel set in a country house in Surrey in the summer of 1935, she reads a second copy of the same book, glancing at me over the top of the pages and stopping when I stop. On poker night she's the only woman among us; I watch her narrow her eyes as she checks her tightly held cards and slides a white chip sharply forward with her index finger. At breakfast she eats the same cereal I eat, using the two-percent milk I prefer; her orange juice, like mine, has lots of pulp; at the mall, she chooses the same brand of running shoe, with mesh nylon uppers and antimicrobial insoles; our umbrellas match; our sunglasses are identical; when I tell her my childhood memory of running toward a rainbow in a field of high grass, she recounts the same memory. Once, when life was too much for me, when I needed to get away from it all, I drove north for

five hours to a drizzly seaside town, where I took the last ferry to an island with a rocky shore before a dense forest, in which stood a single cabin without a telephone. When I opened the door and held up my lantern, a raccoon leaped from the table; bats swept across the ceiling; pinecones lay everywhere; on a wooden chair I saw her purse.

8.

A sword in my bed divides me from my eighth wife. If I love her, I must not touch her; to do so would be to violate a vow that she herself has exacted. True to my word, I remain inches from her, sick with desire. My plight would be lessened if I were never to share my bed with her, but my eighth wife insists that she lives solely for these moments. Mindful of my suffering, which is also hers, she sometimes conceals her body from me, slipping between the sheets with her quilted down coat zipped up to her chin. At other times, suffering for my suffering, and desiring to reward my feat of denial with the one pleasure she can permit, she'll adorn herself with blue-green eyeshadow, purple-black mascara, crimson lipstick, expensive oils, creams, and lotions, and dabs of perfume behind the ears and on each wrist, and display herself, on her side of the sword, in shimmering and translucent underclothes in a variety of fashionable styles. It's possible, of course, that my eighth wife wishes only that I'd violate my vow, despite her assurance that to do so would be to destroy her love for me by making her lose respect for my word. How else to explain her presence in my bed, her provocative underclothes, her frequent headaches, her prolonged sighs? Indeed, it's tempting to believe that the real test isn't whether I can demonstrate my love for her by remaining true to my word but whether I love her fiercely enough to smash through an arbitrary prohibition—an event she secretly desires and desperately awaits. But the very temptation of this thought is a warning: in my state of violent desire, dare I trust an idea that encourages me to betray my word and to side with the passion I'm struggling to overcome? It's also true that, despite my suffering, I'm proud of my success in keeping my word; to succumb to temp-

tation would be to experience a loss of self-esteem. Is she perhaps desirable to me only insofar as I'm able to overcome desire? In that case it's I who have encouraged her to exact my vow, it's I alone who am the source of my torment. Sometimes a strange longing comes: to plunge the sharp sword deep, deep into my eighth wife's side. In this desire to be rid of her and thereby end my suffering, I detect a secret flaw. My suffering, however painful, is always qualified by the possibility of failure, the possibility that, despite everything, I'll become like other men and break my word at last; her death, by removing that possibility, would remove the sole thought that relieves my anguish. For all these reasons, I understand with terrible clarity that my plight can never change. In this understanding I sense a final danger: by believing that nothing can change, do I not relax my will, do I not open myself all the more to temptation? And with a last, desperate burst of strength I rouse myself to new rigors of wariness.

9.

There are times when I can't bear the company of anyone but my ninth wife, despite the little secret we never discuss. What does it matter to me if, bending to gaze into her brilliant dark eyes, I see her looking a little to the left or right, so that I have to shift my position slightly to create the illusion that we're gazing deep into each other's eyes? Sometimes, as she crosses the room with her graceful strides, she'll happen to knock against me if I'm not quick enough to step out of the way. On these occasions she doesn't stop, doesn't acknowledge me, and the slight smile on her lips remains unchanged. In every way my ninth wife is cheerful and obliging. Why then should I complain if, holding out my hand lovingly to lead her toward the bed, I see her stare past me? Why should I give it a second thought if she steps on my foot as she walks to the bed alone and lies down with her little smile? Once, as I was about to plunge my face into the thickets of her hair, I was stopped by a faint

sound that appeared to be coming from her throat. When I bent my ear against her neck, I heard a dim whirring. A small adjustment proved necessary, after which, despite the interruption, I was able to devote myself entirely to the pleasures of the dark.

10.

In an atmosphere of drawn curtains, medicinal smells, and perpetual twilight, I visit my tenth wife, who's burning up. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes are unnaturally bright; on the dark coverlet her pale arm has the whiteness of bone. Illness consumes her. Fever parches her lips, burns along her throat and eyelids; her ears are hot. Her straw-colored hair, brown in the dusk and uncombed, streams on the pillow. Her hair was once straight and obedient, but illness has released a hidden wildness: it falls in snarls and tangles, plunges over the pillow edge, tumbles along the bedspread, where it lies sprawled and spent. I've brought her a few violets and marigolds, picked from our garden, but when she strains to raise herself, lines of tension crease her forehead, as if she's struggling against two hands holding her shoulders down; after a while she gives up and falls back, exhausted. I lay the flowers on the bedside table, near the digital clock. A glass of water, decorated with orange and green fish, stands on the table beside a box of tissues. When I hold the glass to her mouth, she drinks eagerly, desperately; suddenly she turns her head away. Water flashes on her face like a wound. I wipe her lips with a tissue; they're cracked like dry leather. With my fingertips I stroke her hot, pale forearm, her bony cheeks. Under her fevered eyelids her large eyes glitter. I want to comfort my tenth wife, I want to lavish her with attentions, but there's little I can do except sit on the chair next to the bed. In this dusky room, in this world removed from the world, I feel myself bursting with health. My vigor strikes me as intolerable, like a shrill, continual noise. What to do? Her illness excludes me—since she cannot be well,



I have to become sick. Slowly I bend down and kiss her dry, hot mouth. I want to inhale her fiery germs, I want to drink her fever, feel her disease glowing inside me like hot spiced wine. Deftly I slip under the heavy covers, releasing an odor of stale bedsheets. Am I mistaken, or do I sense a slight soreness in my throat? My forehead feels hot. Is it my imagination, or has my hand grown pale? I will find her, I'll join her at last in her own land. Eagerly I meet her gaze. Her eyes, weary and glittering, stare at me as one might stare at a sudden animal across a stream.

11.

Whenever there's work to be done, when things can't be put off a second longer, I turn to my eleventh wife, who knows exactly what to do. It's she who climbs the tall ladder and fastens the loose gutters in place, lifting her hammer into the blue sky as she plucks a gutter nail from between her teeth, while down on the grass I steady the ladder rails with both hands. She's the one who strips the paint from the front porch with the electric sander, bending over the boards in her dust mask and safety glasses, she it is who repairs the cracked ceiling above the basement landing, caulks the second-floor window frames, installs copper flashing in a roof valley, replaces a rotted porch post, while I carry paint cans, fetch drill bits and putty knives, and bring her large glasses of ice water that she drinks lustily, with her head flung back. Standing in the shade at the side of the house, I look up to see her crawling across sunny roof slopes or leaning far out of upper windows. Tools glint on her body like jewels; her bare arms quiver with energy. Once she begins a task, it's difficult for her to stop. At night I can hear the blows of her hammer on the roof; at dawn, through the partly open blinds of my bedroom window, I can see her ankles and the rung of a ladder. Sometimes my door opens in the dark and she comes to me, like a shout in the night. She lifts a screwdriver from behind her ear; carpet tacks fall from her hair. She's efficient, she's brisk. Afterward, as I turn my head in the hope of resting against her shoulder, I see her, through eyes heavy with sleep, striding about the room, measur-

ing heights with a metal tape, screwing brackets into the wall, swinging up two-by-fours that rise into a row of shelves.

12.

If I speak of my twelfth wife as a negative woman, it's because she is the sum of all that did not happen between us. In a crowded room on a summer night at a party overlooking a lake, I did not cross over and sit down beside her. I did not, seated beside her, begin a long, ambiguous conversation, during which I bent my face closer and closer, while she, laughing lightly, tucked one leg under a thigh and brushed a few crumbs of potato chip from her sleeve. That night we did not walk hand in hand along the shore while inventing new names for the constellations and bursting into wild laughter. In July we did not pick up a rented Opel at the Zurich airport and drive along winding roads past green hillsides spotted with red-tiled roofs on our way to a high hotel with a balcony that looked down at the shining water of Lake Geneva and the dark towers of the Castle of Chillon. One night in August, in the amusement park, I did not, seated on a blue horse, watch her throw back her head and laugh unheard among carousel melodies as she rose and fell on her red horse with the white bridle and the golden mane. The negations multiply swiftly, forming a rich pattern in reverse; spawned by an initial gesture of refusal, our unacted history outgrows the narrow compass of accomplished lives. We cannot end, for time does not contain us; nor can we suffer change, for the structure of our negative biography rests on the unchangeable foundation of nothingness. We are more than mortal, we two. All lovers envy us.

13.

In a sense, I've never seen my thirteenth wife. If, as I help her slip out of her winter coat with the thick fur collar, I look away from her green eyes to watch her pale-yellow hair lift up and fall onto the white wool of her sweater, then when I return my gaze to her face I'm lost in admiration of her rich brown eyes and the convolutions of her mahogany-dark hair against her crimson blouse. A moment later, returning from



"I'm afraid it's two, three months, tops, before you're all pants."

the closet, I'm cast into reverie by her melancholy gray irises with little flecks of amber around the pupil. On a single walk across the carpet, she displays her calves in black nylon tights shimmering as liquid, striped orange-and-white kneesocks turned down once at the top, rose-colored silk stockings imported from Italy, and paint-spattered jeans with the cuffs rolled up, while each turn of her neck reveals a new profile, each movement of her wrist a new hand. The incessant changefulness of my thirteenth wife may, of course, arise from something deceptive in her nature, as if she's continually casting up new images in an effort to evade responsibility for any one of them, but I incline to a different explanation. Her clothes, her gestures, her faces, all are familiar to me, though sometimes so faintly that the memory is a kind of tremor at the back of the brain. It's the peculiar fate of my thirteenth wife to evoke innumerable pasts that aren't hers; she is composed of my memories of other women. To see her is to experience all the women barely noticed in public parks and crowded bus terminals, the half-seen women sitting at wrought-iron tables under the awnings of outdoor restaurants or waiting in line at ice-cream stands at the edges

of small towns on hot summer nights, all the women passing on suburban sidewalks through rippling spots of sun and shade, the briefly stared-at women rising past me on escalators with glossy black handrails in busy department stores, the silent women reaching up for books on the shelves of libraries or sitting alone on benches under skylights in malls, all the vanished girls in high-school hallways, the motionless women in wide-brimmed hats standing in gardens in oil paintings in forgotten museums, the black-and-white women in long skirts and high-necked blouses packing suitcases in lonely hotel rooms in old movies, all the shadowy women looking up at departure times in fading train stations or leaning back drowsily on dim trains rushing toward dissolving towns. My thirteenth wife is abundant and invisible; she exists only in the act of disappearing. This perpetual annihilation is her highest virtue, for by ceasing to exist she increases her being; by refusing to be a particular woman, she becomes a multitude. Though I am denied my thirteenth wife, who is always other, denial is her generosity, and I'm grateful to her for more lasting gifts: the gift of memory, the gift of desire, the gift of astonishment. ♦