

# Available

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# LIGHT

Phillip Gardner



**AVAILABLE  
LIGHT**

PHILLIP GARDNER



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*For Tressa*

## Get Drunk and Screw

MY WIFE WENDY AND I devoted our weekend mornings to yoga, to breathing and stretching and finding a place where we heard the flow of a soft current and felt the touch of a fresh breeze. From about eleven until one, we watched the war on CNN. We drank from one until I'm not sure when.

Our dream had been to move to Costa Rica one day because it's so beautiful there, so resplendent with life. We couldn't imagine a place more ideal for yoga and meditation. You can still get war news on CNN. The last time we were there we saw a special on Chet Atkins, who had recently died. Just for the record, you get Braves baseball, too.

You don't have to worry about freezing to death in Costa Rica. That had been another attraction for us. It's true that you don't have to worry about freezing in Florida. But in Florida there are the Republicans. Costa Rica had been our dream.

Jimmy Buffet is from Florida. Jimmy was singing on the radio. The song was "I Wish I Had a Pencil Thin Moustache." I'm not a Buffet fan, and now I loathe that particular song. I think that Buffet-the-man is probably a good guy. And he can't be held responsible for all those seventies fraternity boys who took his advice, got drunk and screwed and had frat children who became Buffet fans. Can't fault him for all those Republicans. The point is, Wendy and I weren't parrotheads, so I took notice when she turned up the volume and sang along, only she changed the lyrics.

"I wish I had some silicone implants," she sang, looking down at her crossword puzzle. At first I let it slide, but then every time the chorus repeated itself she sang, "I wish I had some silicone implants." She was still humming the melody after the song faded.

"They're dangerous," I said.

"Every woman with beautiful breasts is dangerous," she said, reaching for the gin.

"I mean the silicone."

"Not anymore," she said. "New studies show they're safe. *I wish I had some silicone implants.* I saw it on CNN."



THE NEXT DAY, I called. She didn't answer. I tried again. For three hours.

"How was your day?" I said. She was making drinks.

“Okay, I guess.” She looked away with that blank stare I associate with people watching television.

“What did you do this afternoon?”

She spoke as if she’d not heard the question. “Nothing much.”

“I called. I left messages. Where were you?”

“Shopping.”

“What did you buy?”

“Nothing. I was running errands.” She lifted her glass, held it suspended before her like a crystal ball. “What’s for dinner?” she whispered to the glass. “I thought we’d go out.”

The restaurant, which was painted in soiled parrot colors—murky reds, yellows, blues, and orange—was crowded and deafening. Its walls smelled of hamburger grease. Cheap, shrill speakers piped in Jimmy Buffet non-stop. The hostess seated us beside a long table of twelve softball players still in uniform, each ripe with spent chewing tobacco and sweat.

“Why this place?” I said.

“Because we’ve never been here,” she said from behind her menu. “Let’s have a margarita, a giant one.”

Before we’d finished our drinks, I ordered. Wendy laid down her menu. “I don’t think I’m hungry. I’ll have another one of these,” she said lifting the goblet.

My food was slow to arrive. I ate quickly, but not quickly enough. “Do you want dessert?” I said. Wendy looked from her empty glass to the men seated at the long table. She smiled but didn’t answer. Waiting for our bill suddenly seemed a bad idea. “I’ll go up front and pay,” I said.

I stuffed the receipt into my pocket and looked back for my wife. She was standing behind one of the seated ball players. His cap was on the floor. She held his head back against her breast and ran her fingers through his hair.

“Look what I found,” she called to me. The men were taking it as good fun. “I found Yoga Berra, at least one of them.”

“Wendy—”

“Which one of you is Yoga Berra,’ I said, didn’t I, guys? Isn’t that what I said?” She was holding his cheek against her, combing her fingers through the young guy’s black hair. “Yoga,’ I said, ‘he’s my *favorite*. When you come to the fork in the road, take it. It’s not over till the dead woman croaks,’ that’s what Yoga says. Now they’re all Yogas. Aren’t you? I’m a hit,” she said smiling brightly. “Get it? Tit’s a hit.”

The men were polite, I have to give them that much. The one bent down then looked up apologetically as he retrieved his cap. I gripped Wendy's hand and started for the door. Behind us a table in back sang Buffet loud and out of tune. Gawking parrotheads looked up from slogging back their beers and gnawing their cheeseburgers. Suddenly she stopped and took my face into her hands. "His last name, Buffet, it has a meaning," she said to me. "Guess what it means, I dare you." Looking away, I again reached for Wendy's hand, but she pulled away, turned and called out to the ball players. "Hey, Yoga, watch this!" She formed the perfect Warrior III and held it flawlessly. Then relaxing from the yoga pose, she lifted her chin and crossed her arms against her chest. Smiling, she majestically bowed then curtsied grandly.

In the car I was too angry to talk. She wouldn't look at me. When she reached for the radio, I pushed her hand away.

"I'm getting some new tits," she said. "Maybe I'll get just one and see how I like it. Or maybe I'll go the whole hog. We'll have to wait and see."



THROUGHOUT OUR MARRIED LIFE, fifteen years, I was absolutely faithful. Wendy had been married before, in her early twenties, to her college flame. But that didn't last long. I, meanwhile, traveled, made work my life, earned good money, and slept with lots and lots of women. But not after I fell in love with Wendy. Even now my erotic fantasies converge upon my wife. I can't imagine another woman. I believed that our having both been around the block was a good thing, that we had explored and satisfied the doubts and curiosities that threaten others. Our carnal past might promise a greater degree of conjugal safety, I'd thought.

It was our practice not to go out during the week and rarely so during Charleston's peak tourist season. But when I walked in from work, Wendy stood near the door waiting, purse in hand.

"Let's get out of here," she said.

"What's up?" I said.

"Stir crazy," she said. She gave me a drive-by kiss on the cheek. I smelled the gin.

"Where were you this afternoon? I tried to call."

"Stir crazy," she said. "I had lunch at Magnolias. Alone. Come on, I'll tell you about a conversation I overheard at the table beside me."

The telephone rang. "Don't answer that," she said. "They were a lovely bouquet of lesbians, at the table I mean. They were so, so beautiful, I can't tell you. Hilarious, too. Don't answer. Let's just go, I'm famished."

The old market is the center of Charleston's tourist trade. O'Henry's is one of its tourist bars. That's where we were headed.

The clamoring mass of vacationers spilled from the sidewalks onto Market Street and advanced with the velocity of cooling lava. Upon the eastern horizon, a full moon hung like a white shadow. From the west, yellow beams of dying sunlight penetrated her thin white blouse, exposing the pink flesh of her shoulders.

"Because we won't run in to anybody we know there," Wendy shouted. "We'll pretend we're tourists. Maybe we'll be outrageous." Then she spoke in an exaggerated Brooklyn accent with a little extra nasal thrown in, "Maybee we'll shoow our aasses," she said.

The only open table was near the restrooms. Wendy ordered a double. She sat with her back to the room but turned to look around as I spoke.

"Who was on the phone?"

"I'm thinking about going into business for myself."

"Is that what the call was about?"

"How should I know? No, the concept just now came to me. Look at those guys."

The three were middle-aged. One wore a vintage Braves baseball cap, plaid shirt, and cheap tennis shoes. Another wore a reversed fishing cap to cover his baldness and a wife-beater tank top. The third clawed his scabby cheek for sand fleas.

"Give me six months, and even old Yoga Berra in the Braves cap would leave this bar with a woman's number," Wendy said. "I'm calling my service Losers to Choosers."

The music was too loud to carry on a conversation, the service slow. By the time we'd finished our second drink, the room was writhing with tourists and fogged with cigarette smoke. Wendy stood. "I'll be right back," she announced. I watched as she vanished into the crowd. She was there. Then she wasn't. I watched and waited. After a time, I signaled for the hostess to hold our table while I looked for my wife. Just as our young server spotted me, I saw Wendy, working her way back. She had a fresh drink and held up a lighted cigarette like a trophy. She glided into her seat.

"Where have you been?" I shouted over the music.

“Talking to the DJ,” she said. “He’s a hoot.” She pulled awkwardly on the cigarette and glanced back over her shoulder. “I made a request. Some Buffet.”

“You’ve taken up smoking?”

“A young guy at the bar offered. I just couldn’t resist.”

The waitress was at our table now. “Oh, good,” Wendy said in a spirited, overly animated voice. “Let’s go ahead and order another drink. It’s sooo crowded.” Averting my look, she tilted her head slightly and appraised the waitress head to foot. “Two,” she said, raising two fingers then looking from the buxom young server to me. “My, my,” she said. The woman turned.

“Wait!” Wendy called over the roar. “I have to tell you the funniest thing.” The young waitress, a coed, rested her elbows on the table, bent her ear, and closed her eyes to listen. Wendy’s eyes widened cartoonlike at the serving of abundant cleavage before her, then turned and mouthed the word, “WOW!” She laid her hand over the server’s, intertwining their fingers. “You’ll want to hear this,” she said smiling up at the young woman, who smiled back. Wendy lifted her glass, then drew in a deep breath. “At Magnolias today, I sat beside a table of lesbians; you’re not a lesbian, are you?” The waitress was being a sport. “And they were talking about sex, about the benefits of girl sex, and one of them—they were all lovely, not butch at all—and the one who was really gorgeous, I mean drop-dead, said in a voice like this, ‘As long as we’ve got two of these,’ Wendy pointed at her breasts, ‘we can *always* get one of those!’” She pointed toward my crotch. Wendy and the waitress laughed.

The server reached for our dirty glasses. Wendy held her arm. “If you were a lesbian, you could say so,” Wendy said to her. The woman looked to me for help. My wife stroked her arm. “You could tell me. You’re so beautiful. You ought to live.”

“Yes, ma’am,” she said, pulling her hand away. “I’ll get your drinks.”

“We’re all bi,” Wendy called after her. “Curious anyway.”

The drive home was silent until my wife said she wanted to stop at the Holiday Inn.

“I have to work in the morning,” I said.

“I didn’t mean to spend the night. I just wanted to pee in the ice machine. I never peed in an ice machine.”

“Not tonight,” I said.

“Buffet” she said. “Warren Buffet, that is. I’ll bet that guy pees wherever he wants.”



THE NEXT DAY WHEN I walked in from work, I asked Wendy again where she'd been.

"Nowhere," she said. "It's just been me, my crossword puzzles, and the war here, all alone together all day."

"Why won't you answer the phone? Tell me."

"Oh, I did run over to Lowe's." She was taking a towel and a bath cloth from the hall closet.

"What for?"

"They were having a special. I bought a stud finder." She closed the closet door. "To hang the Costa Rica pictures, you know. I have to bathe now." She locked the bathroom door behind her.



AT THREE O'CLOCK THE next afternoon, I sat alone in my office staring down at the phone. I wasn't thinking about calling Wendy. I was considering calling my lawyer for advice. Before I dialed, the phone rang. The speaker said she was calling for a Dr. Sloan. She said the man had been trying to reach Wendy.

"You his secretary or his wife?"

"No, I—"

"Who is this Sloan character? What is his connection to Wendy?" The woman wouldn't answer. "Listen lady," I said, "you called me. I'm her husband, and I want to know what's going on."

"All I can tell you, sir, is that it's very important that your wife call the doctor immediately. She has the number."

"Who is this really?" I demanded. Then the line went dead.

I didn't get an answer at home.

There is a kind of sadness that literally hurts your heart. That sadness is not a figure of speech. It's the opposite of a metaphor. The metaphor becomes the thing itself. That was my feeling as I drove home. I didn't know if Wendy would be there, or what shape she might be in if she was—or who might be with her. I only knew that there wasn't enough air to breathe. Not even enough to stir the flames of anger or jealousy. Only enough to experience the sort of love you only come to know when you feel it leaving you.

Wendy sat on the sofa in front of the muted television, her back to me. She didn't turn when I walked into the living room. She didn't question my coming home in the middle of the afternoon.

“Wendy,” I said, “we have to talk.”

“The war is going badly,” she said. “I don’t want to hear any more about it. Badly. I’m thinking that tonight’s dinner should be a Chinese buffet, or maybe a Jimmy Buffet buffet, what do you think? Do you know what his name means, Buffet?” She was still facing the screen. “It means like a battle.”

I saw the full glass on the coffee table. Our photographs from Costa Rica covered the carpet at her feet. She patted the sofa cushion beside her. “Sit, sit,” she said. Her eyes veered to the photos. “I’m planning our next vacation.”

I didn’t sit. I stood looking down at her. “We have to talk, Wendy.” She wouldn’t look up at me. I couldn’t see her face, but I heard the shift in her voice. “Okay, okay,” she said. She selected a snapshot, studied it, and laid it in her lap. “We’ll talk.” She reached for another photo. “But not now.” The air left her voice. “First, we’ll do some yoga. Then we’ll have a drink and watch the war. Then we’ll have a Jimmy Buffet buffet, and then we’ll come home and watch the end of the Braves game, and we’ll take a warm shower together and then we’ll talk, okay?” I knelt in front of her, but she bowed her head denying me her face. Faintly she said, “And then, I promise we’ll talk, about anything you want.” She turned her face away and touched my hand. “We’ll even talk about mammograms if you want. But then you have to promise that we will get drunk and screw.”

“Okay,” I said, taking her into my arms.

“Say it,” she said. “Promise.”

“I promise,” I whispered into her ear.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay.”

## Acknowledgements and More

**This story is provided by the author and publisher in honor of National Breast Cancer Awareness Month.**

“Get Drunk and Screw” was originally published in *The North American Review*.

A collection of 18 of Phillip Gardner’s stories, entitled *Available Light*, will be published by Boson Books/Bitingduck Press on November 1, 2013.

Visit the author’s website at <http://www.phillipjgardner.com/>

### **Advance Praise for *Available Light***

“This new collection leaves no doubt that Phillip Gardner is in the first tier of the South’s finest short story writers. His empathetic imagination, vivid language, and understanding of what makes a memorable story are of the first order. His voice is utterly his own.

Available Light takes the reader beyond the realm of pain and pleasure and into the sublime.”

—*Ron Rash, author of Serena and One Foot in Eden*

“Every character is complex in all of these stories and the writing is genuine and beautiful... This is a lovely collection about love in all its various forms, who we are because of it, and the ways it changes us.”

—*Kathleen Dandeneau*

## About the Author

Phillip Gardner is a three-time South Carolina Fiction Project winner and a Piccolo Spoleto Fiction Open winner. His stories have appeared in the *North American Review*, *New Delta Review*, *LIT*, *Interim*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, and other journals. His stories have been anthologized in *Inheritance: Selections from The South Carolina Fiction Project* (Hub City Writers Project) and *A Shared Voice* (Lamar University Press). He is the author of two short story collections, *Someone To Crawl Back To* and *Somebody Wants Somebody Dead* (Boson Books). He teaches at Francis Marion University.