

LAURA, LINDA, SWEETIE PIE

Daniel Wallace

She went crazy, briefly, in the fall, and tried to kill him. He wrote a story about it. In the story her name was Maureen, and instead of putting little pieces of gravel in the chocolate cake she was making for him, he had her put little pieces of gravel—and glass—in a strawberry tart. Nice touch, he thought, the glass. *Glinting in the bright kitchen light.*

She recovered just as the story was appearing in a magazine, and she read it, and sued him. He wrote about that, too, finishing a short piece before the trial itself was over. In that story he wasn't an author and she wasn't formerly crazy, but everything else was just about the same. In the writing he was somehow able to eke out a happy ending, with her actually dropping the suit and coming back to him. He had his lawyers send her a copy, and when she read it, against the advice of her own counsel, she was moved. She dropped the suit, and went back.

Her real name was Laura. In his stories, other than Maureen, it was Linda, Carol, Beth, Deirdre and Sweetie Pie. In one story she went nameless, and in the novel her name was Emma Fairchild. But whatever the name it was always, unmistakably, her. She was the star of just about everything he wrote, and when she wasn't the star she made a cameo appearance, he gave her tiny walk-on parts, as though he were one of those nepotistic movie directors, the kind who employs his mistress and members of his family in every film he makes. But he wasn't a director; he was only a writer. Still, you knew who "the golden-haired girl" was when the narrator spotted her, even briefly, in the supermarket, or when, out of the corner of his eye, he spied a girl "with hair the color of sunshine."

For a period of time—almost overnight—he became famous, but then just as quickly drifted off into a puzzling obscurity.

His mother often wondered why he never wrote about her, and one day came out and asked him. He told her he was sorry, and promptly wrote a story with his mother in it, although everybody could tell it wasn't his mother at all, but Laura dressed up to look like his mother. It was the best he could do.

As for the woman Laura, she loved him, she just thought he wrote too much. So he wrote about that. In this story he changed things around so that he was a salesman who was passionately devoted to his craft, but everything else was just about true to the facts, and it won a prize.

Then one day she got sick, and stayed that way for a long time. It was hard, but he wrote about it, indirectly: Laura was absent from his stories now, but all his other characters became ill with something. They coughed a lot, and took long naps. As she got sicker and sicker so did everybody else in his other world, until finally nobody in any of his stories ever got out of bed. They were a bed-ridden lot, and his stories were very dull.

Finally, of course, she died.

After the funeral, he sat down at his desk, picked up a pencil and wrote, *And then one day she died.*

He looked at what he had written, and he didn't like it. At all. *She died one day*, he wrote.

But he didn't like that either.

So he erased it all and, in a flurry of inspiration, wrote *She got real sick, but all of a sudden started feeling better.*

That was pretty good.

He had never seen her look so radiant.

Oh, yes!

And he lived, and she lived, and everybody lived happily ever after.

But that was a story.

The end.