

Laptop

By Scott Schoenberg

WHY WE LIKE IT: *We were hooked when we read this absorbing study of a man's obsession over his wife's suspected infidelity and the lengths he will go to prove it. Dramatic tension builds throughout the story until it reaches not a resolution to the mystery, not a confrontation between accused and accuser but rather an electric detente, where, for the briefest of seconds, they see each other laid bare. It's not 'fancy' writing but it's honest, literate and poignantly human. And the questions, to the author's credit, remain tantalizingly open-ended. Did she or didn't she cheat? Was he or wasn't he paranoid?*

Laptop

1. We were married and we shared the laptop. Technically it was hers, but we shared it. Just like we shared the dishes and the kids and the bed.

I never bothered to clear the history, even when I watched porn. For one thing, this allowed me quick access to my favorite videos the next time I wanted to watch without having to do any searching. For another, she was technophobic enough that I didn't think it would occur to her to check the history, if she were aware of that function at all. And finally, even if she did, so what? As far as I was concerned, it would only confirm for her that I was a sexual being, a virile dude. After all these years, that was a plus.

But that evening, the one that she was out with "the girls," after I'd tucked the kids in, I

noticed there was a link amid all the Facebook entries and Google searches that I didn't recognize. I clicked it and a video opened that I didn't remember watching called *Full-figured Indian Squeals with Pleasure*. I looked at the history again and saw that the link was sandwiched between her Facebook page and several searches for "blue dress with sleeves." The time and date told me that the video was viewed the previous evening, when Timmy and I were out at Leslie's softball game. My heart raced with the revelation.

I played the video and watched apprehensively for a minute or so, trying to understand what she might have seen in it. Had she somehow mistakenly clicked on this link? No, the timestamps on each of the surrounding links suggested that she watched for a good ten minutes or so. She usually refused my overtures, but here was proof that she still wanted it. Wanted something. Wasn't I enough for her?

It wasn't the "teen tries so-and-so for first time" genre I that usually favored, but it was fine for this type of thing, even if the woman was somewhat larger than I preferred. But imagining *her* watching it while *I* watched it created a tension and driving compulsion for me which I hadn't experienced before. There was a hint of misdoing, almost like taboo-crossing, and I was as aroused as I could remember being. More so.

When she came home after her girls' night, I tried a move on her but she quashed it with force: "What are you doing?" she asked disgustedly, as if she'd walked in on me while I was painting my nails. And then she turned over to go to sleep.

Each night after work, I'd find a moment to furtively check the history on the laptop. When she was going over homework with Leslie, and Timmy was playing his video games, I'd skulk over to our room and hold it, my heart pounding with anticipation, the slim silver MacBook become an object of strange power in my hands. And each time I tenderly spread its

two halves apart, it was like opening a portal directly into her fantasy sphere, one that I had lost access to, if I'd ever had access in the first place.

But it was all without reward until a week later, the day after Timmy and I had gone to another of Leslie's games, and this time it was more arresting than the last. This time, nestled between an Amazon search for skin moisturizer and Mandy Patinkin's IMDB page, was a link that opened up to a video called *Petite Latina Violated by Black Stud*.

I snuck into the bathroom with the laptop and was filled with a conflicting medley of emotions as I watched: arousal and feverish excitement, yes, but also pangs of inadequacy and aloneness; somewhere beneath that, regret over having discovered this portal in the first place; and somewhere lower still, guilt over violating what could only be called her trust. I closed the MacBook and decided that I wouldn't look at its history again.

This resolution lasted less than a day. The next night was our scheduled sex date. I had been looking forward to it all week, just like I always looked forward to our biweekly sex-date Friday nights. I eagerly ate dinner and then eagerly tucked the kids into bed and then compulsively checked my phone, the whole time keeping one eye on her, as she leisurely watched her shows and laggardly undressed and then perfunctorily crawled into bed.

We made love but there was something amiss. Or rather, it was just like it always was, the same rote movements and tender-loving gazes, the same chummy dirty-talk and performative expressions of encouragement and pleasure. But I was bereft. *It* was bereft. Bereft of something. She wasn't as enthusiastic as her Latina MILF avatar was, nor did she squeal like her full-bodied Indian did. As soon as we were finished, I had a mad compulsion to go watch her videos again, which I did in the bathroom after she'd fallen asleep, and I was forced to acknowledge, with some reticence, that my own performance, not to mention my physical attributes, left something

to be desired.

The next evening, over dinner with the Walkers, Jenny made a joke that she and my wife were so close that they were constantly being accused of being a couple. Russ and I had a good laugh about it and Russ, while adjusting his glasses, said with his customary smirk, “If I were only meeting you two for the first time... well, you know, I’d probably assume that too!” And we all laughed. And then on Wednesday, after the kids and I had been to piano lessons, I took that blessed-cursed object into the bathroom and discovered to my great shock and infinite pleasure that she had watched a video called *Lola and Leila Make Each Other Cum*.

To say this turned me on would be an understatement. I was at DEFCON 1 arousal level, a 10 on the Richter Scale of sexquake. My heart pounded my ribcage to rubble as I watched and re-watched and imagined *her* watching those two going at it. She had never once confessed to me an interest in women, even all those years ago when we first were getting to know each other and everything was exciting and new and the world seemed full of the remotest possibilities. Did this turn her on, these women and their tongues and their lingerie and all the fake fur and their terrible giggling? It turned *me* on, but then it was supposed to.

But then I remembered the jokes from our dinner with Jenny and Russ, and I wondered if perhaps it was all pointing to something that wasn’t actually so funny. I spent much of the rest of that mostly sleepless night racking my brain for evidence of their affair. They were close, all right, but were they *that* close? Was she going to *leave* me for Jenny? After perseverating on the question for what must have been hours, I took a sleeping pill and faded almost immediately into the black.

The next morning, when she was in the shower and the kids were having their breakfast, I went through her text messages, specifically the ones that were to and from Jenny. They were

innocuous enough, though an awful lot of them were devoted to a back-and-forth about *America's Great Catch*. I knew, of course, that they both loved the show and watched it religiously, but still I wondered if they were perhaps talking in code, a code which I was unable to crack.

During a break at work, I brought up our bank and credit card statements, but I didn't find anything out of the ordinary in those either. I logged into her email but closed it at once, feeling that it was a breach of trust. But then I logged in again, unable to stop myself, but I found nothing that stoked my suspicions there either. My thoughts drifted back to the texts about *America's Great Catch*, but I dismissed it all as plain paranoia on my part. The girls loved the show and that was all there was to it.

I knew she had plans to have lunch with Jenny on Saturday while Timmy and I would be at Leslie's softball game, and I casually asked her where they were going.

"Ah, that's a good place," I said. "What time?"

"I don't know," she said dismissively. "Why?"

"Just curious. It's nothing."

After the first inning of Leslie's game, anxiously checking and rechecking my phone for the time, I turned to another girl's father and asked him if he would mind keeping an eye on Timmy for a few minutes. I told him that I had to pick up a prescription and I wouldn't have time after the game.

I drove by Jenny's house but I didn't see her car in the driveway. Then I headed home, just to look in on things, and wouldn't you know it, Jenny's RAV4 was parked right there on the street. I eased over to the side of the road, unsure of my next move. Were they in my house, in my bed, acting out the Lola and Leila video?

I got out of my car and, as I walked, I was overcome with a difficult-to-describe duality of emotions: a powerful desire to catch them in the act, red-handed so to speak, and to have my suspicions confirmed; at the same time, an equally potent desire to have my suspicions disproved. But the latter eventuality posed a problem. If they were simply not currently doing the thing, that wouldn't necessarily mean that they hadn't already done it or that they weren't intending to do it. It simply would mean that I didn't catch them in the act. And so for this reason, I favored the former prospect with its promise of closure over the latter, despite its potential for upsetting my life in every conceivable way.

My pulse was twitching my fingers and toes as I took the final couple of steps up to the front door. I turned the doorknob -- it wasn't locked -- and slowly opened the door, trying my damndest not to make a sound. I could hear them cooing as I tiptoed through the entry hall. Their coos became moans and giggles as I crossed into the living room. Were they in our bedroom? I started down the hall, first passing Timmy's room on the right and then Leslie's, my eyes wide as Frisbees. I could hear them twittering like songbirds behind our bedroom door, and I slowly pushed it open. There she was, half-naked and stepping into a romper, my one true love, and I thought I might collapse.

"What are *you* doing here?" she asked violently, my heart fibrillating and about to erupt.

Nothing was right. Why was she asking me that? Why was she angry rather than embarrassed or contrite? Why was Jenny grinning and fully dressed, nothing mussed at all? And I realized at once that I had it wrong, that I hadn't ambushed them in the midst of a tryst. She was just trying on clothes for Jenny, something that I'd seen them do from time to time over the years.

"I forgot Timmy's inhaler," I said.

“Where are the kids? Where’s Timmy?”

“Mike’s watching them. Mike Malone.”

“You left Timmy with Mike Malone?”

“Yeah, he’ll be fine.”

She scoffed. “Why didn’t you bring him with you?”

I ignored her, said hello to Jenny, who was still grinning, and fetched Timmy’s inhaler from his room.

“I’ll see you later,” I shouted and drove back to the park.

That night, after she and the kids were in bed, I took the laptop into the bathroom and opened it with a lusty anticipation bordering on mania. I went directly to History, my finger hovering over the button expectantly but teasing myself by not actually pressing it. And then I pressed it and was dumbfounded to discover that the history had been “cleared.”

I checked over and over again, thinking that there must be some mistake, that maybe I’d done something wrong in the way I opened it. But there was no mistake, her history had been cleared and there was no salvaging it.

2. We didn’t talk about it, so I didn’t know for sure whether she was onto my snooping. But the clearing of her history did something to me, scrambled my brain a little, made me a bit paranoid. I proceeded under the assumption that she was not only onto me but that she was now aware that one could look at the other’s browsing history, and so I became very careful to clear it whenever I visited any sites that I didn’t want her to know about.

And I became accustomed to seeing that its history had been cleared whenever I opened the laptop. You’d think we never used the thing anymore if you looked at the history, despite the

fact that one or the other of us had our nose buried in it most nights. But it always went the same way for me whenever I logged on: an irrational anticipatory zeal would take me over while I halved it and typed her password, and then the inevitable deflation would follow upon my confirming that it had indeed been cleared.

And so a few weeks later when the evening came that I discovered a single item in the history just waiting there for me, as if it had been dangled before my nose like a pair of stripper panties, it took a moment for it to register. And then in a gorgeous instant, my pulse went machine-gun and my pupils dilated and I could feel myself fully aroused.

It was a link to a video called *Suburban MILF Cheats on Husband with Accountant*, and before the meaning of the video had sunk in, before I had considered what she was attempting to communicate to me, I had my way with it in the usual frenzied way. In fact, it was more fevered and frenzied than normal, as its existence there, the reopening of this portal, if you will, into her innermost sanctums, was intoxicating, and I went about the entire thing in a state approaching ecstasy.

But as I sat there in the bathroom afterwards, half-spent from the jolt of computer sex, the only soul awake in our three-bedroom tract home, the dark's desolation started working on me. "*Suburban MILF Cheats on Husband.*" I repeated the title over and over again, quietly, its implications burrowing into my consciousness. The only accountant we knew was Russ, and so I dismissed that part of it. But I couldn't shake the notion that she was trying to tell me something. She was *surely* telling me something. She left it there for me, wanted me to see it.

The arc of the video's narrative, such that it was, went as follows: The suburban MILF is seated in a waiting room. The secretary, a blonde showing an implausible amount of cleavage, calls her name and tells her that Mr. Morton is ready to see her. She goes in to Mr. Morton's

office and explains to him that her husband can't be there because he can't get away from his work. She complains that he's always working and they don't spend enough time together anymore. Mr. Morton is an empathetic sort and he comes around the desk to comfort her. He strokes her hair, her hair is *her* hair, dark and curly. He caresses her cheek, *her* cheek, shiny in the lousy lighting. *She* unzips his fly and they start their number, her oohs and ahhs reverberating into the waiting room and caroming off my temples and straight down my spine.

Was she confessing an affair? Is that what she was doing? Or was it something else? Was it an elaborate means by which she could tell me that she was still hot for me but that she thought I worked too much? Is that what she was trying to tell me? Was she telling me that she *missed* me? I was touched by the possibility.

The actress who played *her* was named Melissa Minx. I searched the site for every Melissa Minx video and found one that I thought would be a good counterpoint to this one. I cleared the browser's history and clicked on the new video, *Busty Brunette Gets Busted*, about a woman who gets caught masturbating by her husband. They both act like this is the most embarrassing moment of their lives, and then they have sex for no apparent reason, other than the fact that to not have sex would undermine the whole purpose, this being a porno video and all. I wasn't interested in it for any carnal reasons as I was already completely wiped out, but I wanted it to be there, waiting for her the next time she went to clear the browser's history, calling out to her: "I'm onto you too!"

Over the next few days, we swapped knowing glances, knowing glances and little satisfied smirks. I felt very close to her, closer than I had in a long while. I made an extra effort around the house and made sure to pick up after myself. We didn't talk about any of it, but there was an implicit wink in some of our exchanges: "Did you get the milk like I asked you to?" "Of

course I did, honey. I'm the milkman." Or "Don't forget, we've got the thing at the Sullivans' tomorrow." "Ah, yes, the ménage-a-twelve." When she asked me to cream-cheese her bagel one morning I thought I might spontaneously combust.

And a week later, after I'd checked the laptop's history at least a couple of times a day and each time having been sorely disappointed to discover that she'd left no crumb for me in the history, I came upon the next volley in this little tête-à-tête of ours. I saw the website's familiar orange logo and became instantly aroused and overcome momentarily by a deep feeling for my wife. I read the title, *Mature Hottie Blows Well Endowed Neighbor*, which was an obvious reference to Aaron Trainer, the famously good-looking teacher who lived two houses up from us and whose wife, Cindy, scandalously left him a couple of years before for a doctor from over the hill, and immediately, after consummating with this machine-portal-wife, I knew how to respond.

I searched the site for references to any "Cindy" and found the perfect comeback to the Aaron Trainer video: *Tight Teenager Cindy Bangs Does Anal For First Time*. I hesitated for a long moment before clicking the link, considering the possibility that *she* might be receptive to anal sex. But then I dismissed the thought out of hand, remembering that we hadn't even been keeping up with our biweekly vanilla sex dates -- how long had it been? I wasn't sure -- so the notion of introducing some new, exotic move into our repertoire seemed completely out of the question. Still, I was brimming with curiosity to see what she'd post in answer.

I didn't have to wait long for her to respond. Just two nights later, I skulked into the bathroom with the thing and clicked on the lone link in its history: *Anal Gang Bang 12*. Good God! Who was this woman I married? But I figured she was just being cheeky, no pun intended, and that she didn't actually enjoy the video, which was every bit as smutty and grotesque as you

might imagine. No, she was just posting it as a clever riposte. My cheeky, clever girl.

I told myself over and over again that this was the case, but still a recurring thought gnawed at me: What if I had it wrong and she wasn't trying to communicate with me at all? What if, by some quirk in the way the browser records its history, she wasn't doing this intentionally and she still didn't know that I was onto her? What if this whole give-and-take was one-sided and I had misread everything and she was none the wiser? And if any of this were so, then the next thought followed naturally: *Anal Gang Bang 12* must actually turn her on!

And it wasn't only *Anal Gang Bang 12* either. This portal that I'd opened up, which had begun as a mere trickle of innocent exploration, had grown into a vast ocean of lusty need. After *Anal Gang Bang 12*, there was *Man Makes Stepdaughter Squirt*, a compilation video of men ejaculating onto women's faces, and something called *The Fisting Olympics*, for which I couldn't even muster the fortitude to watch. I was overwhelmed by her voraciousness and was embarrassed every time I looked at her. Who was she and was there no bottom to her appetites?

But no, I told myself. The videos were too obvious, the clues too on-the-money. This was a new thing we were doing, this back-and-forth. She was teasing me, testing me. It was a cute thing and it was breathing new life into our marriage, which, let's face it, had grown a little dusty over the years. I quite liked this thing we were doing and I wasn't about to screw it up. I had to come back with a worthy video retort, something that would blow her hair back a little, something that would make *The Fisting Olympics* seem like the pitiful little smut piece that it was.

So I went about perusing all the most reprobate videos I could find, using keywords like "fart" and "shit" and "S&M" and "humiliation." I looked at countless amateur videos, chat-room videos, even gay stuff -- and not the lesbian kind either. I watched one after the next in a sort of

monomaniacal fever, my lids growing heavy as the night wore on but my attention never wavering, my pupils like black holes sucking up everything in front of them. Something was compelling me, practically moving my twitchy fingers, to watch one after the next, but it all left me unsatisfied.

The Internet contains a dazzling assortment of human kink but none of it was adequate for my purposes, and by the middle of the night I knew my task required something even more depraved and more extreme than what I could find on any of the usual sites. And so after several hours of intense probing, downloading something called “Tor,” along probably with a bevy of incurable computer viruses, and possibly exposing our entire life savings to the digital underworld, I found myself at long last on some misbegotten corner of the Dark Web.

The Dark Web. It sounds sinister but it looks just like the ordinary internet. The ordinary internet without limits. There's nothing obviously indecent or illegal lurking there, not until you specifically search for it. But once you start seeking it out, you very quickly glimpse all sorts of stuff you don't necessarily want to see and you learn things about your species that you'd probably be better off not knowing. But there's also something irresistible, very much like rubbernecking it to see a car crash, about looking directly into the heart of man and seeing his multifarious yens and hungers laid bare.

Finding a topper to *Anal Gang Bang 12* or *The Fisting Olympics* wouldn't be much of a challenge in terms of finding something that was adequately depraved. The problem was knowing how far to push things. Because the Dark Web is limited only by the lawlessness of your dreams. And so I watched and I watched, and the night grew darker and darker and my eyes grew blacker than black holes, until I found what I was looking for. It was a video called *Your Wife*, and it was amateurish, even by porn standards. The visuals were grainy and the sound was

barely audible, the acting atrocious.

It opens with a shot of a bedroom, an ordinary bedroom much like our suburban bedroom, the walls white, the decor tasteful, in which two people are having sex. The camera slowly zooms in on the couple, the woman on top, and we can hear her rhythmic gasps along with the man's occasional grunts as they move each other closer and closer to climax. He's grabbed a tangle of her hair and she's arching her back and the image is bad and the sound is bad but they're moving closer and closer. And it was her hair that had me transfixed. Because it was *her* hair. And I don't mean it was *like* her hair, but I mean that it was *her* hair, kink after kink of black curls. And her back too, swaying and arching to their particular rhythm, was *her* back, right down to the mole on her scapula. And those gasps were also the same gasps that I knew all too well, her alto breathy and certain as always.

I looked around to get my bearings and then I brought the video back somewhat and watched and rewound it and listened. Beyond the room's ordinariness, I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something familiar about it. I looked at the walls again and I was sure I'd been there before. I rewound it and watched and rewound it again. That face that I'd looked at thousands or even millions of times. I rewound. Her ass! And again. Her tits! I rewound. And her skin! I rewound. Her fingers! I rewound. Her mouth! And again and again and again. There was no getting around it, it was *her*!

But the man, grunting and panting, pulling and shoving, muscular and lean, was not me. No, no, it wasn't me and it wasn't Aaron Trainer from up the street either. No, the image was grainy, but I was sure of what I was seeing. I recognized him even without his glasses on, with his receding hairline and his ridiculous smirk. Even in the throes of adulterous sex he wore that smirk. I cursed myself for not catching on earlier, as it should have been obvious from the first.

Every step of the way, I'd been tormenting myself over the wrong things. But everything made sense for the first time since she started with the porn, and I even felt a certain freedom in surety. Or if not freedom then at least closure, for I was certain that I had at long last cracked the code. I finally had her right where I wanted her. I finally had her in my sights.

I watched the video countless times, thousands of times, even though I know that that's impossible. And while I watched, the video slowly transformed. The colors became more crisp, the dialogue more clear, the camera angles shifted, transmuted subtly until the view became my sight field. What I saw the camera saw. And what began as the groans and moans of sex became the unmistakable sounds of laughter. It was my laughter but they were using it to laugh at me. They were laughing and I couldn't get enough. I wanted them to laugh at me. I rewound and they laughed. I rewound and they laughed some more. If I just kept rewinding, I could have all of their laughter. Their laughter made me feel something, something more than sexual, and I wanted all of it.

I laughed with them all through the night until I found myself on the office floor, covered in a fluid that smelled like gasoline. My ears were screaming and my head ached. I saw *her* there, but I didn't believe it. What could *she* be doing there? She didn't normally come in to check on me. My elbow was bleeding and I lifted the bottom of my shirt to dab it. I was somewhat reassured to discover that it wasn't gasoline with which I was drenched, but rather it was piss. But why was I covered in piss?

She was there, all right, sitting on the couch, clearly bothered, and shaking her head as she scrutinized the laptop. She was there and she looked beautiful. I've always particularly loved how she looks when she's upset. There's something uniquely wholesome about her at moments like these, uniquely radiant. But I felt something burrowing into my stomach, as if it were

hollowing my insides out. I was scared. I was scared to death of her. Something told me that we couldn't go back after this. That something was broken. That I'd broken it. I'd seen that look before. It said, "What kind of a piece of shit are you anyway?"

So I said, as casually as I could manage, "What's going on?"

Her eyes fixed on me from behind the laptop. I tried to imagine her as one of her avatars, the thick Indian or the spicy Latina or the lusty lesbians, but instead I was forced to consider her actual person there, the woman whom I married and said those vows to, the woman whom I watched through childbirth and sicknesses and through all the crass slights of aging. This woman whom I loved.

"I don't know," I said. "This whole thing, you know, the porn thing has gotten out of hand."

She just stared at me, still shaking her head. I couldn't remember clearing the history before taking the Ambien, and so she must have had at her fingertips all of the most depraved monkey-sex and hit-man-for-hire links from the Dark Web. She must have had in her grasp what she thought was surely a window into my deranged psyche.

"When you posted the *Anal Gang Bang* video, I thought I had to come up with something really, really... Well, something really *sick* to kind of burn you with."

She still only stared.

"And the one about giving Aaron Trainer a blow job, well, I was really worried that you were cheating on me with him. But then when I saw the video of you and Russ..."

And now I started to cry while she only stared. I cried and I cried. I wanted her to tell me that it was all a bad dream, that we were okay. I wanted her to hold me. I walked over to her and put my hand on her shoulder, but she flicked it away as if it were an insect.

“Is it true? Are you and Russ...?”

And now she snapped at me: “I should be asking you the questions! You’re the one who’s always up at all hours of the night doing God knows what! So don’t put this on me. I’m not the one who woke up all scratched up on the floor. Look at yourself!”

I wanted to measure my words, to come back with something that established my control, my dignity. But my head was throbbing and my heart was heaving and I needed to know and so I asked again.

“What about the *Anal Gang Bang* video? Was that... Was that for *me*?”

She looked at me for a long while and I knew then that she pitied me. In that quavering instant I watched the corner of her mouth begin to twitch. She felt it and I saw it and we both knew the moment was at hand. The moment of revelation! And then the twitch worked on her mouth until, to my astonishment, it was transformed into a smile. A sad and cunning smile that lay beyond the bounds of my experience, and now the tears building up.

And she said, finally: “I think we need to talk.”

The End

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I don’t know how it came to me exactly, but I loved the idea of a wife and husband who communicate solely through the links that they each leave for each other in the ‘History’ of their shared laptop. That the links the couple leave for each other are all to porn sites made it all the more appealing. Once I got to writing the story, it transformed from the light-hearted satire about modern love that I had envisioned into something a bit darker, though I hope it still works as satire. I’d been reading a lot of instructional pamphlets when I wrote ‘Laptop’—like the ones that come with IKEA furniture—and I approached this story with the same ‘just the facts Joe Friday’ mentality with which the pamphlets are written. You know, this happened and then that happened and now you’ve got a bookcase. But then it turned into this other thing, this meditation on male obsession, and so I have to blame James Salter and Robert Coover and probably Stanley Kubrick for that.*

BIO: *Scott Schoenberg is a writer and musician hailing from Los Angeles. He lives with his wife*

and two sons and a dog named Thunderchicken. I wrote a piece about Chubby Checker that PopMatters published.