

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/1

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MOXIE

THE NURSE, AS ALWAYS, IS TOO YOUNG. He feels her eyes on him.

She smiles at Howard, fresh-faced and scrubbed despite everything, and fluffs the pillow under Angie's neck. Her fingernails are the color of lightning, with some kind of glittering stones on the thumbs. He turns away from her, embarrassed.

"How you folks doing today?" she asks, the smile still on, painted. "Everybody doing okay?"

Angie, as usual now, merely nods. She'd had a rough night, rougher than the others, and the pain and the prodding and the tests have sapped her. He closes a hand around her's, under the covers, out of sight. "Be strong," he thinks.

"We're doing just fine," Howard says. He tries to finish the rest of it. "It certainly is nice out."

"I can wheel her to the window, if you'd like."

He shakes his head. "It's okay. We're fine here."

She stands up straight, her duty complete. Professional right to the end. "Any pain today, Mrs. Fish?"

Her voice is a rattle now, and it makes him run cold. "A little, yes. It hurts when I turn."

"Left or right, Dear?"

"Left."

Another nod, curt this time. She's almost gone. "Left. Okay. I'll tell the doctor."

She's on her way out, straightening the curtains along the window, and Howard lets out a little sigh. But then she turns, and she looks right at him, and everything in his body goes cold.

"And what about you, Mr. Fish?" The smile, huge now, aimed at him, like a dagger. "How are you doing with your handsome self?"

In the light from the window, he gets a good look at her. She's attractive, flirty, her hair curled and poised on her head. In truth, he'd always been uncomfortable around women like this, on edge. He'd long ago gotten the sense that they could see into him, somehow, like they'd been given special glasses at a fair. He lowers his eyes, studies the brown and white checkers on the floor.

"All good today," he says. "Thanks again for your help."

In the doorway now, both hands on the sides like she owns the place. "I'll be back in a few to get you cleaned up," she says. "And I'll speak to the doctor about your pain, Mrs. Fish. Anything else?"

"That's enough, thank you."

She turns then, and he watches her go, the tears and the vice in his

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throat closing all over again. The door eases shut on its hinges and Howard turns to his wife. She's staring straight up, the tubes from the IVs draining into her arms like a marionette, and her face is perfectly still.

"For God's sake, Howard, stop it," she says to the tiles. "She doesn't know."

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She was diagnosed, finally, by an earnest man, older, heavy in the face and wan, with those square-framed, chunky black glasses that he'd always seen his students wear, the ones that had always been too expensive for him.

"We'll start treatment as soon as we can," the oncologist had said, smiling for the sake of it. "Let's get you settled in." The room was white and too bright, with yellow accents that didn't make sense.

She'd peered over the doctor's shoulder, catching Howard in the corner. "You all right, Howe?"

He'd nodded, of course, but he wasn't. The room was too small, the paper under her bottom rustling loud as she moved, and he found he couldn't breathe. He watched their mouths move, watched her nod. Stage four. Metastasizing. A horde of barbarians inside her.

They should have caught it earlier, of course, but you always missed these things, the thrum and the throng of life getting in the way, making you ignore the little pains and the slow agonies, the quiet signs that something might be wrong. The weight loss they'd chalked up to Angie's retirement.

"I'm fine," she'd said to him once, clocking the concern in his face. "It feels like maybe gas?"

She'd passed a steady stream of dark blood while sitting on the toilet one morning, constipated and grumpy, and he'd blown three reds getting her to the ER. In the end, they'd found the lemon-sized cyst buried in the walls of Angie's colon, its tendrils entwined throughout her body like lace.

The X-ray tech had muttered a curse under his breath, than looked up at them, embarrassed.

That had been five months ago. Now, looking back on it, Howard knew that the chemo had been the worst part, the pointless part. The staving of the horde. At times, in the night, he'd hold his wife's head, the bandanna brushing against his chin, clinging onto her until his arms cramped while she dry-heaved and gagged into the washbasin. The nurses had drawn their steel-blue curtain closed, and he could see the bottom of it billow from the open window on the other side. Rhythmic and gentle.

"I can't do this anymore, Howard," she'd choked into the crook of his arm one evening. "I can't. I won't."

"Breathe. Just please breathe."

"I won't."

That night they began to talk about it.

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The pharmacist in the drugstore is tanned and thin, the Boynton Beach sun doing its damage. His goatee looks cut with a knife. His delts bulge like small babies under his lab coat, and he looks down on Howard from the top of the world and smiles. Howard shifts his feet.

"How are you doing today?"

"Good, yes," Howard says, then, inexplicably. "I think it might rain."

The pharmacist considers this, then returns to the scrips in his hand. Howard watches his mouth. He imagines a hole opening, sucking him into it, closing behind him with a snap. He smiles wide enough for it to hurt.

"Is ... there a problem?" he says.

A glance up, a shake of the head. "None at all. It'll just take a bit to fill."

"I guess I'll look around."

The pharmacist bends back down to the prescriptions, and heads off to the rows of pristine bottles and drugs and boxes, a medical universe on the other side of the counter. Howard watches him go. He thinks of his wife. She's been talking less and less often now, her eyes haunted, and she smiles sad at him when he wipes the saliva from her mouth.

"Stop fussing," she'd said. "You're always fussing."

The pharmacist disappears behind one of the white, spotless shelves and Howard suppresses a shiver. It'd taken him a full three hours to steal the prescription pad from behind the nurse's station, another two before he'd built up the courage to use it. He'd written the prescriptions in the oncologist's rushed, ragged hand, then panicked and shredded them to pieces. Too structured, too deliberate. Anybody would catch it. He'd flushed the scraps down the toilet, and did it again, forging the physician's handwriting over and over, working on the heavy, stoic angle of his signature on the bottom of the pad, the twirl of the S at the end. Again and again, until he had it perfect. It was undetectable. No one would question it.

Later, in the men's room in the lobby, he'd held one of the hospital towels in his mouth, and tried not to retch.

"You do what you have to do when you have to do it," the principal at his school had said to him once, after Regents. "You do what you have to do and you don't think about it. Don't let them dictate the class, Howard. They're algebra students. They respect order."

He watches the pharmacist return to him fifteen minutes later, the prescriptions filled, the bottles of Percocet and Valium clattering in his hands. His face is a cloud.

"Be careful with these," he says. "Be especially careful."

Howard pays no attention. He takes the bottle and he leaves the RiteAid. He feels bigger than himself suddenly, a ten-foot tall man with a prized buck, and he settles in the front seat of his car, feeling triumphant.

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Later on, he stares at himself in the men's room mirror, past the smudges and the cracks, studying himself. There are more lines around his eyes and his forehead than there used to be, cracks and valleys stretching out in all kinds of directions, a map of the ages, and he barely recognizes his hairline. There's too much crust in the corner of his eyes. He's always looked young for his age -- it's hereditary, his father told him once, it's a sign of good character -- but that's seemed to have left him, somehow.

He tries smiling at the person in the glass, watching the muscles, then gives up and splashes cold water in his face. His hair is matted to his head and he smooths it over the bald spot near the back. The sleeves of his shirt are wet.

He wipes his hands on his pants and breathes in deep, pulling in antiseptic and the smell of the toilets.

"Okay," he says to himself, nodding. "Yes. Okay. Yes."



She hadn't wanted to marry him.

A loud, spirited woman, Angie had been divorced twice before, and had no interest in it. She'd never really paid him much attention, running drills with the high school's volleyball team after class, her sweats gripping her hips, her whistle jutting from her teeth. During games, he'd sit in the stands, quiet in the back, his hands on his knees, watching her coach the team, watching the wisps of the gray in her hair flash when she'd jump to argue a call. The fire. He thought she was Greek architecture.

After two months, finally, she'd agreed to go out with him. "Just one drink and that's it," she'd said after practice, the wisps of her hair plastered to her ears. "Don't read too much into it, Mr. Fish."

Over dinner, he'd told her how he felt. His parents, long gone now, lost to time and age and depression, would have loved her, he'd said. He'd even reached for her hand.

"That's ridiculous," she'd said. "You don't even know me."

"No, that's wrong. I do know you. I know you perfect. The way you are with the kids, it's--"

"It's a job. I'm not good with kids."

He'd waved it off. "That's not important. No one would know," he'd said. "We could ... keep it secret."

"You men. You don't know what this takes. You think it's a toy you play with."

He didn't know what she meant. He'd reached again for her hand. "It's not. It's not a toy. Not at all."

"You're sweet." Then, low, "Sometimes I think you're too nice."

He'd spent the rest of the semester at the same spot in the bleachers,

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straight through the playoffs, watching her, cheering the team. They'd lost in the second-to-last round by a whopping margin, a loss that sent most of the crowd home in tears, and he was there, cheering, clapping his hands red, supporting her every substitution, her every losing strategy. Angie's players thought they were related.

After the loss, he'd waited outside the locker room with a bouquet of flowers. They were engaged a year later.

"What the hell," she'd said to him. "I like your moxie."

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Now, thirty-one years later, Howard looks down at his wife, watching her breathe. She is pale and too thin, and her flesh hangs. The doctors have suggested therapies, experimental treatments that make his head spin, but he can see the truth in their faces. They're giving them their privacy more and more often these days.

Still, the nurse will be back soon.

Howard pulls up a side chair, sits down next to his wife. She has always been a strong woman, and her eyes flutter open immediately. She smiles, a wisp of a thing. Her breath is sour.

"You're back. Did it work?"

Howard nods. He can hear her wheezing, the soft ping of the machines near her head. Everything takes so much upkeep, he thinks. Out in the hallway, a girl giggles.

"Do you have them, Howard?"

"Are you sure about this? Are you sure?"

"Please. We talked--about--about this." A shift, to ease the agony, and she winces. "Do you--have them or--don't you?"

He nods, dumbly. He feels like he's watching someone else from the ceiling. His wife's eyes on him, Howard pulls the bottles from his pocket. Three jars of applesauce sit on the crowded table near the phone and he screws open each one, scooping their lumpy, orange pulp into the plastic dish in his lap. He pops open a dozen pills from both bottles, dumps the powder into the sauce, one after another.

His wife lies next to him, alert for the first time in days, her eyes like the moon.

"Don't spill them," she says. "Make sure you get everything in."

Howard's hands are shaking. He feels like the world is waiting on him. He watches his hands move. One after another after another, a white mound now, sitting on the applesauce like processed sugar. He stirs the mess with a plastic spoon, feeling the grainy mush through the handle.

You do what you have to do when you have to do it, he thinks. *It's really that simple.*

He glances up at his wife, without really meaning to, and he stops.

"Howe?"

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They have been married since the beginning of time. He had to convince her to love him. At the altar, he'd stood next to her, his palms a lake in his hands, and she'd rubbed his wrists and nodded to him. That night, he'd made love to her for only the second time, and had been filled with a feeling he couldn't name, a release that shuddered through him like a tsunami, and he'd sobbed into her hair. During their honeymoon to Myrtle Beach he'd sat on a chaise lounge and watched her swipe her feet through the ocean, the sun beating over everything and he could feel the warmth of the world over his shoulders like a blanket. He watches his hand connected to the plastic spoon. She rasps next to him.

Down the hallway, the squeak of sneakers, louder. "Hurry, Howe," she says.

Everything is a giant, he thinks. Everything on this planet is too big.

"Howard, please--"

He stares at his wife for a moment longer, the raw hunger in her eyes, and something turns over within him. Wordlessly, he begins to cry.

Angie's eyes widen, and then they don't. She turns away.

"Oh, for God's sake. For God's sake, Howard."

But Howard can't stop crying. He drapes his arms around his wife's body, sending the dish toppling to the floor with a splash, and he stays there, clutching her, as the pretty nurse finally returns, at last.