

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

Norbert Kovacs

TIRED EVENING

(Originally published in Corvus Review, March 2017. I have revised the text since.)

On a Sunday evening, Mrs. Betty Gruber sat quietly in her living room after dinner writing her errand list for the next day. She had written down the places to go--the grocery store, the cleaners, the pharmacy--and tried to make up her mind which to visit when without managing it. Betty was used to this indecision. Her worn, creased face showed it; so did her red hair that had faded into a drab brown. Her pale eyes had a bored expression, her eyelids hanging low. She was at the indefinite stage that lies between fat and thin, a result of many failed diets. She had dressed today without much mind for her appearance. She wore a loose, striped T-shirt and crinkled, khaki pants, less than a favorite but ready clothes; a pair of white, cracked house shoes covered her feet. At lunchtime, Betty had walked around the neighborhood hoping to feel more alive than she had the last few weeks. Betty lived in a district of attractive historic homes and went out with a plan to see several of them. She wound up wandering not long after she began, going one street to the next without knowing the reason. "Well, I'm only walking for fun," she had thought to re-assure herself. "There's no harm to it." Betty continued on a long while. The hard asphalt road and the sidewalk reflected the day's heat and the sun's glare, bewildering and annoying her. She had considered at times that she was walking from the handsome homes and great trees she had meant to visit. She did not change course however. Betty returned home, tired and unfulfilled, and continued to feel so into the evening.

On the couch separated from her by a cushion sat her husband Jon. Jon was an homely, absentminded man. He was tall and thin like a celery stalk and had straight, brown hair that lay disheveled on his head. His pure, brown eyes resembled small chocolates, his dark, thick mustache a softened candy bar atop his lips. He wore a gray sports-style sweatshirt and long, relaxed khakis, a favorite pair. He was reading the day's newspaper, his eyes glazed and dull, for the paper had little except political news, but he pretended interest in it as if he might hope the pages into being otherwise. He put down the paper finally and said, as if the theme came naturally, "Have you spoken lately with our neighbor?"

"Which one?"

"The ones in the blue house."

Betty recalled the family. They were a couple with two children, the woman of the family, a heavy, cheerful person. Betty drew a blank when she tried to remember the woman's name. "No, not lately. What about them?"

"They put up a new deck last week."

"Yes, I saw when I was hanging laundry."

"Well what do you think? Doesn't it look attractive?"

"Yes. Very nice, bright red." Wasn't a new deck supposed to look at-

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

tractive?, she thought. The neighborhood people did a lot to ensure their homes were. Two houses down, the couple had installed old style front doors that gave their house an upscale appearance. At the corner, a family had added a bay window, a standard model, nothing beautiful or unique but large and expensive. While unimpressed, Betty had felt obliged to praise it to a friend.

"We may bring it up when we ask them to our party in a few weeks," Jon said.

"You mean the neighbors?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps."

"Whom are we inviting for the party anyway?"

"I'm still deciding. Really, I'd be happy with whomever." Betty considered that their friends were all decent talkers, so any of them would make good guests. Their parties seemed always to find some way to turn out decently with whichever of them came. As she thought this, Betty recalled the party where she had to speak with her husband's friend Ted. Ted had gone on about the new computer installed in the back room of his electronics store, praising its many features. She had smiled and smiled as Ted seemed to talk forever. The talk seemed a failure. She remembered then how she did not get the long joke her friend Francine told her at the same party; the other guests had listened to it glued with attention and laughed.

"I'll choose some guests for us, but you think of some you'd like too."

Jon picked up the remote control lying on the couch cushion and turned on the TV. The program was an adventure/investigation show that featured a man in a business suit carrying a gun. He walked panting atop some office building. Jon watched the show with interest; Betty did not. She saw the main character crawling through an air vent, then shooting bullets at some strange men. She lost the narrative somewhere in between and could not piece together what happened. At one point, the man on the screen was running and Jon, very amused, turned and made some comment. Betty watched Jon's lips move but did not comprehend him. Perhaps he said something I should have heard, she thought. The adventure program ended and Jon changed the channel to a comedy re-run that Betty disliked. "I'm going upstairs to take a shower," she said standing.

"Okay." Intent on the TV, Jon did not lift his head toward her.

Betty went upstairs to their bedroom and undressed in the bathroom that joined it. She was glad to be free of the clothes from her muggy morning walk and dropped them into the hamper with a kind of relief. She turned on the water for her shower, checked it was warm but not hot, and stepped into the stall. She took the soap and lathered her body a frothy white. However, Betty did not feel clean as she washed; the water from the showerhead seemed to cling to her. She knew the water was not hard (they had it tested) so could not figure why it should feel so. At last she finished, turned off the shower and grabbed a big, cotton towel by the stall. As she dried herself, the blood in her limbs warmed and the flesh be-

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/4

neath the towel resisted moving. She put on a bathrobe that felt too warm for her and stepped from the bathroom.

In the bedroom, Betty got a change of shirt, bra, and shorts from the dresser and put them on herself. Her bed lay right by the chair where she sat changing into the clothes and she noted the new white bed sheet and cover for the blanket she had installed that afternoon. Beyond the bed was the bay window; its curtains were pulled back revealing the night sky. The clean, neat look of the bed, seen by the oblique light from the bathroom, made her think she should lie down and rest. She pulled back the sheets, got into the bed sitting up, and covered her legs in the blanket. The white, fresh sheets were cool and smooth on her bare legs. She worked her leg a little against them and enjoyed it. Then she stopped moving and just sat. She felt at ease for the first time that day and gazed out the window at the sky. The night was dark and the stars shone strong and clear. To the side of the window showed the edge of a maple, dense and dark.

A memory suddenly came to Betty. When she was a girl of ten, she and her family had gone one night to a newly cut hay field in the country. Though it was dark, she had seen the field well, dotted with its tall, golden haystacks and far away, a line of maples at the field's edge. The farmer who owned the field was standing by a large fire in the hay stubble and some stones. He greeted her father, who was a friend, along with her brother and herself when they came to him. The farmer's family stood beside him; his boy and girl greeted Betty. The heat from the fire had come to her wonderful and warm and she had been happy for it after tramping across the cold field. Above her in the night had been a very clear sky filled with hundreds of stars. Beside the fire, she craned her head back far to look at them. They had been a wonderful, great number, each standing clear against the night and Betty had felt the whole universe was there before her. And she had thought then the world was clear, sharp, and bright. She had been happy and she had loved the field, the fire, the farmer's kindness, and the many stars.

Yes, it had been beautiful, Betty thought seated in her bed. But where did that wonder and beauty go that she had known? What had she done to lose it? Why, she asked herself, was she unhappy? Her walks were long and pointless on more days than just today. Jon talked to her and on many evenings she did not hear him. Betty sat in the bed and tried to think why. But all she managed to tell herself was that she was tired. She might always be too tired now to think why, she thought.