

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

Andrew Kriever

### LAST SWIM

The water was crisp and needled his nerves. It awakened each of the dead connectors that had been in a three-year slumber. This gave relief to the surgical damage in his right leg. The woman with the kids was in the shallow end. He thought she would be a little prettier had she not covered both her arms with tattoos. He hated tattoos, especially on women.

The woman seemed like a good mom, though. She was with the kids, teaching them how to swim. Her face was pretty, soft. He imagined holding it between his hands as he pressed his lips against hers, feeling that familiar bounce of hers and his, becoming one.

She noticed him looking, so he turned his attention to his laps.

This was the last swim, or at least he thought so. The weather was getting bad, and each time he came in, he was fearful of catching pneumonia.

He always had to end his laps on a specific number, because if he didn't, bad things would happen. He knew this was just 'superstition', but each season when he had violated the rules, something awful had happened. Last year it was the death of the kitten, the little black boy cat with green eyes, the one he named Ernie. Sweet Ernie, the one he loved a little more than the others due to him being his only boy.

That wasn't entirely accurate. He had another one he loved so dearly, an elderly calico. She was between eight and twelve they said, but probably closer to twelve. She was blind in one eye, had a bum leg, smelled of corrosion and death, and was deaf. So, they said. How could one know with a cat, they never respond.

No, that wasn't true either. His girl Sabrina knew her name and would greet him day in day out. She loved him, or at least he hoped she did.

Ernie was a foster. When they inquired about him, the shelter said "he bites". They took him out to play with the other cats and he was very delicate. Ernie played for a little—before a bigger cat jumped over him and took the toy that was in his mouth. He didn't try to get it back, instead he watched as the big ones played, with admiration.

Before they left the facility with Ernie, the woman handed him and his wife a big folder, probably the size of *Atlas Shrugged* or one of the others he admired, full of medical issues Ernie had.

Ernie came in with his two sisters, but both kittens were twice his size. Despite this, they still took the little boy kitten.

His name was originally Donut, but when the man asked his wife what his name was, she simply said "Ernie!"

Ernie's problems only got worse. He had twenty percent kidney function. The vet said he must have been malnourished, but there was also suspicion he had FIP, which didn't and still doesn't have a test.



## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

The woman at the pool eventually got out with her sons. The man continued to swim, and did his long laps now that she was gone. He looked at the sky through his tinted goggles as he felt the water caress his back, as he propelled himself from one end to the other with relative ease. He had been doing this all summer, and the summer before, and before, and before. It was the one thing he was 'good' at, and by good he meant he didn't drown. He attempted the butterfly stroke but lacked the core strength.

Once his routine was done, he had probably been in the water forty-five or so minutes. He knew he needed to end on a good note. He did his flips, and on his way up, before the ladder, he imagined Ernie's soul ascending to heaven, feeling no pain. He mimicked this as he came up gasping for air.



The apartment was quiet. Other than the noises from the trailer park behind, he had a peaceful home to return to. His wife was somewhere, someplace. Would she come back? Probably. No, not probably. He knew she would. She was at a work thing, some training.

His cats waited by the door, ready to sneak out. He didn't let them. He didn't treat them for fleas, and the fleas were horrid. One year Sabrina got them and they had to tear apart the apartment, while also finding out she was allergic to multiple flea medicines. They didn't want to subject her to that kind of treatment again.



Since his wife wasn't around for dinner, he decided to go out to the diner he liked. The waitress he liked was there. She had her curly brunette hair up in a bun. Her hourglass figure swayed as she walked towards him. He knew she looked like his wife, almost a doppelganger, yet he was interested. He liked the same, liked stability.

"What can I get you tonight?" the hourglass-brunette asked him.

He looked at the menu, but already knew what he was going to get. This was a little game they played. "Let's see, what do you think is good?"

"The special tonight is fried haddock. I had some earlier, that's my recommendation this evening."

"Hmmm." He paused, and looked up at her. Her green eyes spoke to him. They dilated, revealing that deep something inside her.

"In that case, I will take the Philly."

She smacked him on the arm. "One of these days, you will take my suggestion."

"Maybe."

She walked away and returned with his drink, a Coke Zero no ice. He always got this. She didn't have to ask anymore.

He observed the hourglass-brunette and thought about his own hourglass-brunette. She had a Midwest accent despite not being from there. Some people said Canada, but most said Minnesota. They were wrong.



He remembered climbing up the waterfalls with her in Kanarraville. He remembered that they were going to name their daughter that never came Kanarra. Had her little body been the same size as Ernie's when she died? How he would have loved to hold little Kanarra, shower her with love.

He remembered telling her to read *The Garden of Eden* by Ernest Hemingway because it was unlike anything else he had written, even though it had been pieced together by editors. He wanted her to see that Hemingway, and himself, had more than one side. He had something deeper that he only wanted to show her. Would she accept?

She had. She had been a wonderful wife in many ways. He only wanted to be with her, yes. He didn't want to be with anyone else, not at all, but he liked to look, he liked to dream, fantasize about what could have been or could be.



The hourglass-brunette came back with his food. She and he had a little more banter, but she was busy and he wasn't feeling particularly good about himself so he didn't push it. After she left, he left his standard thirty-percent-tip. Standard for waitresses he was attracted to.

Outside, in his car he watched the people in the diner. It made him think of a thousand different depictions of diners in movies and art. He remembered the one of the diner in NYC or maybe some other place, the one with the lights on and few people inside. That was where he belonged. Not in New York, but in a place like that.

When he returned his wife still wasn't home. He didn't like to be too dependent, but he was starting to miss her. He knew when she came back, he would probably be back to wanting to be alone. He would want to do his readings, his writing, watch his shows. His. Never theirs. Why was that?

Turning on the TV he watched the news with not much interest. As an adult, he wasn't sure what he was supposed to watch. Sports? Sure, sometimes. Depended on the sport. Hockey season would be starting soon, at least he had that to look forward to.

The Hurricanes had a great season last year, maybe this year would be the one. Maybe. Before last year he was never asked about the hat until they were doing well, playing against the Capitals. All of a sudden, then, people wanted to talk to him about it. He should have embraced their shared interest, but he really just liked to watch and not be a commentator.



His wife came home late and he felt her get in the bed. He turned and put his arm around her, but she told him that she was hurting. He removed his arm and turned the other way. Right before he was about to fall asleep, she wrapped hers around him. He was the little spoon, he felt safe.

The next morning, they drank their coffee and talked about her trip. They looked at houses together and he still wondered if that was the right

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

thing. Did he even belong here? He had lots of friends, but much of it was surface level. He was just a visitor here, did he have permission to make it permanent?

Their rent had raised as it always did, and now the pool wasn't justifying the cost anymore. They needed to get out. Where would they go? He liked the state but hated the car tax. It had been a long decade paying for something he already owned. He used to bitch about it with much more ferocity, but lately he had given up. They will take his money regardless of the means.

Sabrina sat on his wife's lap. Their green eyes matched, they looked like a family. He thought of the child who had died, the one he only knew of for a few days. He told his coworkers, the Mormons about her pregnancy. They had both been very happy for him, happy it had finally worked. He was test-driving cars when she miscarried. He returned to work the next day and told them both she had miscarried and he didn't want to talk about it again.

He had planned to tell his parents later on when she was further along. He called them after it happened and told them he was sorry they wouldn't be grandparents.



After him and his wife had their morning chat, he went to the gym. The day was rainy, and he knew it would be busy, but upon arrival it was empty. Only the woman at the front desk that he was attracted to was working. She was a brunette with curly brown hair, eyes blue, average height, thicker build. She had taken to smiling when he spoke to her, but that could mean anything. He assumed she pitied him, and why wouldn't she. He always came alone and never spoke with anyone.

He hadn't seen her in a while.

"How've you been?" he asked.

She brushed her hair behind her right ear. "I've been fine. Just working here and at the winery. You?"

"Okay. Just busy..."

"Yeah, I haven't seen you around lately."

"Oh, you noticed?" he asked playfully.

She smiled. "Well, you used to be here every Monday morning. One of the first."

"Yeah, I have a job now, so unfortunately those days are done. I hope you have someone to talk to now."

She smiled and re-tucked her hair. "Every now and then."

"That's good." He saw a person outside about to walk in. "Anyway, it was great to see you..."

Before she could respond, he walked into the gym. He was scared of what she might say. Most of his interactions had been brief, always sure to contain his attraction to her. Although, he got the feeling she knew and

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

had told other staff. When he came in on other days, they all looked at him and grinned. *What a dumbass, pathetic.*



That night him and his wife watched a movie together, *The Big Chill*. He had never seen it, and she swore it was a classic. The gathering of friends after the death of one from suicide was powerful and human, made him feel vulnerable. He wasn't disappointed.

He loved watching old movies with her. They had grown up in different decades, so she would always tell him about or show him something that he hadn't known. When they first got together, they had watched *Terms of Endearment*. That was the first time he had cried in front of his soon-to-be-wife.

In recent years, he seemed to cry more and more. He blamed it on *Terms*. After he saw that, a dam had broken. At first, he didn't feel manly enough crying in front of her, now he couldn't care less. He would cry in front of strangers, family, friends, whoever. Really didn't matter, he knew people already sensed his melancholy.

There was one time he had cried in public, in a lecture hall after him and his then girlfriend had broken up. She moved to Los Angeles and he knew he would never see her again. They had a summer-fling-that-he-hoped-would-be-more. No, it was destined to end. She was the complete opposite of him with values for every aspect of life. One time while having sex, while in her they had a political debate. It was exhilarating. She might not have thought so.

Once *The Big Chill* was over, they talked some about it, and then his wife said she was tired. "I am going to go to bed, please take care of the cats."

"Sure thing."

She kissed him softly on his lips. He pushed hard, wanting more, but she stopped. "Why do you always have to kiss like that?"

"Because I can't get enough."

She shook her head, before giving him a soft kiss. This time he didn't do anything. This was how she liked it. Dull, no passion. Maybe the passion wasn't there, maybe it had never been?



He couldn't sleep. He went to the diner, and the hourglass-brunette was there still. She looked a little more tired than usual. Her hips swayed as she approached him. She had on glasses tonight. Sometimes she wore them, he assumed tonight she had taken out her contacts. He liked them on her.

"What can I do you for?" she asked.

"What do you recommend?"

"Tonight, they did a really good lasagna. I recommend that."

He thought for a moment. "Hmm..." Just as his nerves had been nee-

## Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

dled, what was once dead had been awakened again. He felt that desire, passion, excitement that was once present in his life.

He looked around the diner. There was another waitress counting her checks at the counter. A guy was in the back making some noise, cooking-doing-dishes, whatever. The waitress looked at him, her eyes exposed, expectant. She tucked a strand of hair behind her right ear, and licked her lips. They parted slightly, showing the bottom of her front teeth, ready to retort his rejection.

"I'll have that."

"You will?" she said, taken aback. She wrote on the pad.

"Yes, I think that's an excellent choice. Thank you."

"I know you'll like it."

"I think you are right." They stared at each other in silence briefly. As she walked away, he caught her turn back towards him with a little grin on her face. Her glasses slid and she pushed them up with her index finger.

She went back to the kitchen and returned with his food a few minutes later.

"Will you sit with me?"

She looked around towards the door. The parking lot was still empty, minus his car. She sat down across from him. He took a bite of the lasagna, she watched with baited breath.

"How is it?" she asked, biting her lower lip. A pan dropped in the kitchen and the unseen-cook shouted something. He hadn't noticed until then, but the other waitress was gone. It was just the two of them in the dining room.

"It's just what I needed."