

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

Kavitha Reddy Goyal

Weeknight Tacos and Other Feckless Pursuits

HIS MIND FLOODED WITH MEMORIES AS Nisha skipped down the front steps of her home in the same youthful way, a red dress breezing around her body. She jumped in his car, and they embraced, but Jay felt the space between them as she pulled back to reach for the seatbelt.

His excitement dimmed, he sat back and turned to her. "Wow! How long has it been?"

Nisha fiddled with the radio. "Gotta be more than five years since that dinner with the crew, right?"

But decades since they were together. What had he expected? Awkwardness overcame him. "You look exactly like grad school."

"Ha! I wish. I want to hear about everything that's going on with you." She eased in with minutiae about her day in a voice that floated up like musical notes.

He was glad she was chatty. At the red light he inhaled a pleasant scent which awoke a distant yet familiar wholesomeness. He longed to steal a sideways look at her. He resisted the ancient pull, surprised at himself.

She asked, "And how's Marla?"

When he had first mentioned getting a drink with Nisha last week, Marla, his wife of twenty-three years, had not glanced up from her frenetic weeknight taco preparation but there was the subtle yet unmistakable elevation in the pitch of her voice.

"Oh, what prompted that?" Marla had said.

He hadn't made eye contact either, yet he could picture her left brow twitching. As it did, when she hunkered down to crush the imaginary competition. While setting out the dinner plates, he provided Marla a story about exchanging messages with the school buddies on Facebook, and that he was curious to hear how things were working out with Nisha's new startup. He didn't actually know why he had reached to her.

He knew his dissatisfaction with slow-going research for the pharmaceutical company made Marla uncomfortable that he might be exploring options. He'd hinted that he felt a fatigue, a thinness, from the monotony of ineffectual projects and how scientifically sound decisions took a back seat to the quarter's earnings.

Marla obsessed about the nest egg. Was it ever going to be enough? Did she even care what he wanted anymore? What if he did something unexpected?

"Well, as long as you don't get any crazy ideas about leaving the industry." She finally looked up at him over the saucepot, the barb not concealed by the tightness in her jaw.

Typical. With a casual upper hand, Marla had simply slapped it back down as she stirred seasonings into refried beans. He wasn't even sure

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

what 'it' was, but he had felt the non-starter-ness that clustered around her. She moved in a fog of impossibility that sucked the air out of him. His thoughts swung back to the road. "Good. Marla's good. She's doing tax law at the same place. So where are we headed?"

Nisha said, "How about Lula's?"

A dive bar shouldn't have surprised him. Nisha had never been bound by conventions. She had tossed her masters in biochemistry to the wayside within two years after they graduated. He didn't know what she had been doing exactly, yet it smacked of newness and adventure.

The smell of stale beer hit his nose as they walked into the bar and chose a table off to the side.

"Cheers!"

Another fleeting awkwardness misted around the clink of glasses when his eyes met hers.

They had gotten together with other classmates a few years ago, but tonight his thoughts kept going further back. Did she ever think about when they were together? And why was *he* thinking about it- he hadn't gone there in a long time. It wasn't the standard 'what if' that tugged at him, it was something unformed.

"Give me just a second." She took the call on the other side of the bar.

He felt the hard wood of the chair and shifted without relief. His eyes swept over other customers but landed back on her- she was an amazing woman. Her kids were out of the house too. Was she happy with the husband?

With the phone still to her ear, she walked back to the table and caught his eye with an apologetic smile. "Yup, no problem. We'll hash out the details next week when you're in town." She turned her attention back to him. "Where were we?"

"Tell me about the new startup."

Her dark eyes lit up as she shared the aspirations of the company and the people. Seed money, angel investors, an integrated go-to-market strategy, that stuff baffled him. They had studied organic chemistry formulas together.

He picked up his phone to scroll through messages although no one had texted. He crossed knee over knee and leaned back. He feigned a casual glance across the bar at a handful of younger customers. He told himself Nisha wasn't a genius. He could do those things too, if that's what he had wanted.

When she paused, he said, "And George? How's he doing- still with the law firm downtown?"

Rosy lips curved upward with a different kind of excitement as she spoke about George. Jay liked the way she picked up her cocktail with two hands and leaned in so as not to spill the contents. Long lashes flicked above the pale-yellow concoction. Just like back in school, she could barely handle a few sips before she became even more gregarious.

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

And inviting.

Don't be ridiculous, he thought, she wasn't inviting him at all! She was apparently fulfilled with her life.

Nisha went on, "I've been taking Italian lessons for about a year and half now, I love it. Such a beautiful language! It was George's idea, he's doing it too."

Her voice had a musical nature. He could imagine her striving to get the mellifluous words just right.

What was that like- being happy? Work deadened his life. And what was Marla's excuse?

Nisha said, "And he doesn't know this, but I'm planning an anniversary for us in Cinque Terre with a few days in Florence at the end. The kids probably can't make it, but that's ok." She looked past his shoulder, maybe the memory of something intimate.

He picked up the faint fragrance again. It had an unsettling quality, making him admit that something was missing. "What's that scent you're wearing?"

She spoke at the same time, "But I'm doing all the talking." She straightened. "Tell me about you, Jay! What have you been up to?"

He stared at the bubbles in his drink. He ran a finger around the rim, stalling for the need to embellish. Yet no detail about his research or the different roles he'd had over the last nineteen years, or the twins' activities, or even Marla, seemed uninteresting to her. She listened to his glossy enhancements across the board. Except for Marla, he didn't build up anything about her. Nisha asked if he was enjoying himself. Was he happy?

He tossed back the remainder of the second beer and felt warmth spread down the back of his neck.

"And there's the men's basketball league, just neighborhood guys. It's cool- every Wednesday night." He had quit that league years ago.

She nodded. "Nice. What about woodworking? I remember you loved to build things. Oh- I think you were volunteer-teaching STEM to high school kids when we were in grad school. And- am I making this up, or didn't you always say you wanted to go into academia?"

Her eyes were sagacious, despite the martini. She must see right through him, just like back then. She had left him after a year saying there were "things she wanted to focus on."

He had loved Nisha, in his templated, geometric way. Back in their little apartment on Filbert, she'd ask wispy things like how did he imagine himself and what was his pipedream? He had laughed it off. Get a masters, then a PhD, then run a lab- what else was there? He was grounded; she was airborne. At the same time- she bounced around just below the surface of things as she dreamed and designed a life for herself.

He could see now that he had slid his way into the obvious spaces, whatever was straight ahead. He was unnerved by her memories of him, unused to this demand for honesty which raised specters of things easier

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

forgotten. Stretching away from Marla had been years in the making, but what was he reaching towards?

"It's freesia," she said, grabbing her handbag as a smile stretched across her cheeks. "The perfume. Same as grad school."

They waited on the corner for her ride. The over-bright streetlamp interrogated the germ of dissatisfaction that had begun gnawing on him during their time at the bar.

"Let's do it again, with the crew- it'll be great!" She reached up to hug him.

"It was good to see you, Nisha." He was glad that the bye was less stiff than the hello, yet it felt more poignant. The touch of her true friendship melted away from his shoulders.

She waved as the car drove off. He could no longer tell himself stories that she had wandered off the ranch, she had sold out, or her relationships were just convenient. Their contrast was inked in. She was living a full life.

Driving home from Lula's below the speed limit, a hint of freesia lingered. He wished it could haunt him, like the guilt-free daydream of a younger man whose future was not yet rescinded. His eyes unfocused. Block after block on Montgomery Avenue, neatly shrubbed front yards of homes with soft recessed lighting showcased endless flower beds. He knew nothing about flowers but was moved by the planting of things for joy and beauty.

He tried his son, Will, first. No answer of course. Will always screened his calls, caught up in social activities.

"Hey, Seb, what's going on?"

"Hey, Dad, didn't expect to hear from you on a weeknight. Everything ok?"

"Yeah. Yeah- everything's fine. Just wanted to hear your voice." Seb, the quieter twin, on a campus three hundred miles away, would begin to wonder straightaway.

"I'm just leaving the library. Gonna get dinner with the roommates. What're you up to?"

"Sounds good. Uh, not much. . . So- I've been thinking." His voice caught at the end. He wanted a closure to the statement but hadn't an inkling what was supposed to come next. He couldn't escape now.

"Yeah?" Seb probed the digital space.

Jay knew his son would have stopped walking, perhaps found a bench and swung his backpack down between his knees. He'd put all his concentration into what his Dad was saying, even if friends wandered by.

Jay slid his fingers around the smooth leather of the steering wheel. He turned the wrong way at the light, adding a lengthy loop to get home. Seeing Marla would remind him how he had let her desires shrink his life. For the first time in decades, he realized his dreams had not disappeared altogether.

Jay said, "Been thinking that I might be ready for a change." An after-

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/2

thought troubled him. "At work."

He heard a sigh of relief at the other end of the digital connection as he stared at his son's contact photo on the nav screen. Jay exhaled- he'd take this slow. There was no urgency. Not for something as big as what he'd almost slipped and told Seb a moment ago. He needed to see how things felt in the morning. It wasn't going to be easy on the boys, but they were young men living their own lives.

"Ok," said Seb, not betraying any emotion. "Can't say I'm all that surprised."

"You don't think I'm crazy to walk away?" Double heft in his words.

"Of course not, Dad. You gotta do what feels right for you. I mean, I guess you're thinking about that, right? Like what you'd rather be doing?"

"Working on it." He breathed. "Thank you, Seb. You're a comfort to me."

He made sure his voice returned to normal and moved to discussing the mundane so that he could let Seb off the phone without worry.

Jay hadn't allowed the unexpected into his life. He hadn't taken stock of the crumbs of inspiration that chanced into his path over the years. He couldn't see through the layered grime of a lifetime of practicality, until Nisha's fragrance reminded him there someone different hidden under the layers. He was ready to embrace possibility.