

## Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Sara Fraser  
**Blending In**

Sandra is asleep with her feet on the pillow and a satiny blue sheet wrapped loosely around her. She reminds Paulo of a burrito whose fillings are escaping the tortilla that is meant to hold them. A burrito you'd have to eat with a fork. He takes one last look at her before pulling the door closed and catching the bus to work.



He's been late six times in the past two weeks. His boss, Alan White, looks up as Paulo floats past his door, shirt untucked. Alan White grins and twiddles a pen in the holder on his desk. He's fond of the Brazilian upstart: Paulo is a good worker, reasonably smart, a team player. Alan White has no bones about cutting him some slack—a few late mornings can certainly be overlooked. Anyway, he saw the girl once and she was blazing. He's both envious and proud in a dadlike way.

In his cubicle, Paulo's fingers graze at the computer keyboard like disinterested cows.



Paulo met Sandra two weeks ago, when he and some coworkers had gone to the Skellig after work. A girl named Kimmie from HR was resting her hand on Paulo's knee under the tall table where the five of them sat on stools sharing a pitcher of Tremont Ale. Paulo was considering it. She was great looking, though a little more angular than he would have liked. She obviously took good care of herself: she had a tan even though it was only the beginning of May and her eyebrows arched so cleanly across her forehead it was as though they weren't made of individual hairs at all. She talked and laughed, her hand going about its caterpillar crawl irrespective of what her mouth was saying. She was exciting him, but he didn't particularly want to talk to her. Or listen for that matter.

Then Sandra appeared behind the bar, and when he saw her, he felt a jolt throughout his body that made him forget momentarily about Kimmie's rambling hand, and about his own disappearance, a fact that had been preoccupying him very much.



About a week before all this, after his morning shower, Paulo had glanced at himself in the bathroom mirror and noticed that his head and shoulders were fading away at the periphery. At first he'd thought it was a trick of the shower steam, but after wiping with a towel, and even after working over his reflection with antibacterial window wash and a handful of paper towels, he was still decidedly fuzzy. He'd figured it was a flaw in the glass and had gone to work without thinking more about it.

Later that day, as he turned from the urinal in the men's room, his reflection in the mirror diminished into the environment around him. His nose and his eyes were distinct—his eyes were the color of a forest floor, speckled with light and shadow, the bridge of his nose rectangular and masculine. There was his mouth, the matte earthen red of the lips and the

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cleanly shaven skin around them. But the bottom of his chin looked like he'd been sketched in charcoal and blended with a thumb. His ears looked like two fuzzy blobs of light hovering at the sides of his head and his brown curly hair shaded into the municipal off-white of the men's room wall. He was reminded of the portrait of the Welch Corgi that hung on the wall of his mother's Sao Paulo apartment: The glint in the dog's eyes accentuated to look starry and the orange background blending softly into white haze. The effect was an otherworldliness that spoke to the inordinate amount of love his mother had for the dog. As a teenager he had resented his mother for giving that yipping cotton ball of an animal more affection than she had given him, and had rebelled by staying in his room with the windows darkened and smoking a lot of weed. (The Corgi died while Paulo was at university in Boston and he had taken himself out on a drinking binge to celebrate.)



Lately he finds himself ducking into bathrooms at every opportunity, peering at his irrefutable disappearance the way a hypochondriac rechecks a suspicious mole. He wrings his hands into fists and marvels at the way his palms don't feel his fingertips as he squeezes hard enough to leave bright red crescents with nails that are growing long even though he can't see them anymore.



Kimmmie was telling Paulo and three other coworkers about this pair of shoes she'd found at Marshall's that would've been twice the price at Macy's. The others seemed to be interested and Paulo realized with horror that he too probably appeared to care. He looked away, dizzied by how unreal everything seemed, and saw Sandra. She was slipping a denim jacket off of her shoulders and throwing a purse onto the top of an ice chest. Her hair was crushed into a big tortoise-shell barrette. A few unruly pencil-sized strands hung to her shoulders, which were bare triangles making a geometric pattern in juxtaposition with a maroon tank top.

Kimmmie noticed Paulo staring at Sandra and squeezed his knee violently for a moment before withdrawing her hand. Paulo winced but was relieved that at least she had reacted like a human being. Unfortunately she kept chattering, which highlighted the ease with which she could pretend.



The next evening, Paulo went back to the bar by himself. He ordered a pint of Tremont and stood twisting it in circles on the bar, wishing he could feel the cold sweat of the glass, and marveling at how vague and distorted his hands looked. He ran a hand over the top of his curly hair and it was like air brushing air; all he could feel was a slight electrical tingle. Sandra was wearing a Pink T-shirt with the words "no war" spray-painted across the front.

"You were here last night, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Where are your friends?"

"Oh, them. Coworkers. I guess they're somewhere. Not here."

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"Sit down." She nodded at the stool that he was standing next to.

Startled by her command, he realized that he was still wearing his beige coat and holding his briefcase.

"You have nice curly hair," Sandra said as he stood his briefcase on the floor and folded his coat into a square. He smiled, satisfied that she could see his hair. He wondered why others could see him when he couldn't see himself and was unsure about whose perception was closer to the truth.

"It's all still there, is it?" he asked. Sandra put her hand up to his forehead, as if she were checking for a fever, and pushed the front of his hair up.

"All still there," she confirmed.

"The top too?" he asked, tipping the top of his head in her direction.

"Yup," she said. "All there."



Two nights later, he stayed at the bar until closing and walked her home. On the way they talked about their jobs. Sandra loved to paint pictures that sprouted from her imagination, and she found it worthwhile to work nights so she could have her days free to paint. Paulo was going through the motions, he told her, but he didn't know what else to do. His job was satisfactory—it was what he'd studied to do, and it paid the bills, but to be honest, he told her, he was a little bored. Ready for an adventure, he said, and she smiled at his accent, the way he drawled the word *adventure*; he was like a foreign film that had walked into her life and asked her to play the starring role.



At the foot of the three-family where she has the top apartment, he kissed her. There was no sensation where her hands touched his, but he still had some sensation in his lips and like a desert they soaked in her lips, which felt like rain. They leaned into each other on the sidewalk, kissing, until the first lonely birds began to sing from branches, dark against the dawn.



The next night she cooked him dinner, a Mexican version of lasagna that stung his tongue with spice. He trained his hands to do what he remembered them doing when he could still feel them: fork to food, to mouth; he got them into the right place at the right time by watching them and willing them to move. Falling onto the bed after dessert, he made up for what he couldn't feel by imagining her feelings and by using his mouth and the memory of his hands to tenderly make love to her. And she woke his torso and his mouth and eased the center of him into an amplified existence, ameliorating the dullness of his periphery. Every night for two exhausting weeks he has waited at the end of the bar until she finished work and then stumbled with her back to her place, their bodies like magnets for each other.



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Close to lunchtime, he picks up the phone.

"Good morning," he says when she answers.

"Mmm," she groans, "I slept through the alarm."

"How are you?"

"Well rested. How's the office?"

"The same as everyday," he tells her. "Very boring. Can we meet for lunch?"

At the tail end of a luxurious yawn she says, "I'll see you in an hour."



At an Indian place with an all-you-can-eat buffet near his office, they line up and fill their plates with curries and pakoras and raita.



"I'm disappearing," he tells her after they've finished their first plates of food. "Are you having more?" she asks, rising from the table with her empty plate.

"Yes. But did you hear me?"

"Yes. You'll tell me where you're going. We don't need to talk about it now, do we? Let's get some more food."

Paulo ladles cooked spinach with soft chunks of cheese onto his plate. Sandra stands next to him; he hands her the serving spoon. They sit down and Sandra orders a lassi.

"Can you tell?" he asks her. "No one can see it. Did you know?"

"Tell what? That you're going away? How should I be able to tell that? Am I psychic?" She takes a gentle bite of nan, but slams the bread down after biting into it.

"Sandra, I'm not going anywhere," he tells her. "I'm so happy you would care if I was. But I'm really disappearing. I can't see my whole self in the mirror anymore."

She pushes three chickpeas into a triangle on her plate and looks at him, her eyes moving up and down across his face. She puts her fork down and laughs.

"What? I'm serious."

She stops laughing, leans back into her chair. "No," she tells him. "No you're not."

"Can you help?" He hadn't realized that he expected her to be able to save him. But now he sees that that has been his assumption all along, part of what made their meeting so sweet, and part of his motivation for seeing her.

"No."

"Why not? I think you're restoring me."

"I can't help you," she says. "It's always something, isn't it? It sounds

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corny but I thought you were going to be different. I don't know why I thought that. I guess I was wrong ... again." And jealousy burrows into him.

"Again?"

"Oh, come on. Of course I've had boyfriends. We don't even know these things about each other. Tell me about Brazil," she says. "You never talk about Brazil." She leans back and folds her arms across her chest.



"When I was eight," Paulo begins, "my father died, and my mother took us from our village to live in the city."

He tells her that when he moved to Sao Paulo he didn't like it, and that he felt stifled and anonymous among the tall buildings and big schools. Until then he'd had a childhood filled with rope swings dangling over wide rivers, dusty soccer games in bare feet, hunting, great bonfires and village fiestas. He didn't like the old man who began showing up in their apartment, his mother's lover. He was married to someone else but paid for their apartment and Paulo was under strict orders to behave or he and his mother could end up on the streets. The precariousness of their situation, their dependence on his mother's lover, who maybe loved her, or maybe kept her as a diversion, caused such anxiety in their household that what seemed like his mother's indifference he now realizes may have been the result of her feeling trapped by fate. She never showed it if she felt hurt by her son's spiteful glances. He was too young to understand and she was too proud or too distracted by her own problems to try and explain. "I think I understand her now, a little," he says, "it was a matter of losing her freedom. She had no choice. I was pretty mean, too. But it wasn't her fault."

Sandra's shoe is off and her foot is coiled around his calf, but he cannot feel it. "It's nice if you can forgive her," she says, and finishes her lassi, sipping loudly the last slow drops from the bottom of the glass. "But she could have chosen something else."

Paulo shakes his head at her angrily. "She couldn't have," he tells her. "It would have been impossible."

"I can't give you any kind of salvation, Paulo," Sandra says, getting up from the table, "but I can tell you this for free. She had a choice. And you have a choice too."

He feels the whoosh of air as she turns and leaves. Paulo puts his hands together on the pink tablecloth, his arms in a triangle in front of his empty plate. A string of tinny bells crashes into the glass door when it closes behind her. When the waiter, a Sikh with dark feathery sideburns and a grease-stained white shirt, lifts the plate from in front of him, Paulo asks for the bill.