

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 2/1*

### **Knickers**

I was fighting it all the way, wearing knickers, me, twelve going on thirty it felt some days, dreams about Ginnie Wilmot practically every night now, the *morning dew* being the vague remnants my father spoke about with a smile on his face, new hairs in my crotch, my mother wanting her boy *to look neat*, my father looking at the horizon almost saying *this too will pass*. It was his one-shoulder shrug that carried verb and noun in its arsenal. I had early discovered that he did not need a lot of words.

My mother was looking at her choice of two hats, checking them out in the mirror on her bureau. A dried flower was creased in cellophane in one corner of the mirror; I'd heard some reference about it but had declined interest. My father's picture, him in a Marine uniform, was framed in a second corner, my sisters and me in another, in our Sunday best a year earlier. A palm frond from Palm Sunday twisted itself across the top of the mirror. I think the hats were as old as I was. I knew she would pick the purple one. Her eyes announced the decision prematurely; again, an article of speech. Much of the time we were a family of silence, where looks or shrugs or hand gestures or finger pointing said all that was needed. My cousin Phyllenda had given the hat to her. "You'll look great in this one." I could never tell my mother Phyllenda's boyfriend had swiped it from a booth in Dougherty's Pub in Malden Square where he'd go of an evening or two. I'd seen them talking an evening on the porch, Dermott's hand up under Phyllenda's dress and it not yet dark.

A May Sunday was a bit snappy this early with the sunrise. "There will be hundreds of people at Nahant Beach today."

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Both the radio in the bedroom and the kitchen were on; her music almost mute in the background. She looked out the window across Cliftondale Square, across the green of the traffic circle and the new green of elms already leaping at full growth against the sky. On the third floor we lived, yet not as high as some of the elms. Gently a nod was spoken, an affirmation. "They are waiting for summer at the beach," she added. "They go walking on the beach looking for it. It's over the horizon a few weeks yet. We will go right from church. You will wear your new green suit." At length it had become her trip-hammer approach, the hard music. In that voice I felt the agencies of iron and slag at a mix. "You don't know how proud I am of you in your new suit. And two pair of pants, at that." For sure, iron and slag in her words, the new and the dross. At her lighting up about the new suit, I cringed. *Two pair of pants* seemed eternal, would carry me into high school, into football, the mold of the locker-room, pal-talk growing the way my older brother would nod, owning up to all I had heard. Hell, there'd be knickers, for God's sake, for girls, lots of them prettier than Ginnie Wilmot who once sat across a log flashing her white underpants at me so that something happened in my throat, something so dark and dry and dreadful that I can taste it yet.

Simon Goldman it was who sprung the suit on my mother, little shrunken Simon with the poppy eyes and the red face, on Saturday morning collecting his due of pennies she yet owed on a parlor set. "It's green herringbone tweed, my Helen," he said, in that possessive delivery he must have developed early in his game. "It has two pair of pants. For you yet cheaper than anyone. Resplendent he will be in it. Resplendent. No boy in

this whole town has a suit like it. And the famous golfers wear knickers, I've seen them in newsreels at the theater. Hogan and O'Brien and Downey, McDevitt and Fitzpatrick,

McHenry and that Shaun whoever from Swampscott." He was inventive, you had to admit. I'd have said a liar as well as a schemer. "Two pair of pants. Green. Herringbone. Think

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of the message.”

His eyes almost fell out of his head, dropping Ireland almost at his feet, dropping it at her feet. I almost pushed him down the stairs, he was at it again, selling her, saying it was a bargain, saying you people are climbing the social ladder on my advice and merchandise. Truth is, she cautioned me once, only once, on how I should remember Simon. “I found him,” she had said, “he didn’t find me.”

The worst part of it all, putting on the suit, the knickers with knee length socks, was having to take off my sneakers. I thought they were welded to me. I thought I’d wear them forever. I belonged in sneakers, foul or fair, “But not in your new suit.” It was as if her whole foot had come down on the subject. My father lifted his chin, flicked his head aside, gave off a mere suggestion of a nod, shrugged his shoulders. *This too shall pass*. With a knife he could not have carved it deeper.

In my new greenery we headed for Nahant Beach, me in my green knickers, four sisters all dolled up in the back seat of the old Graham, the titters and snickers behind their hands, my unsworn vow becoming animate at the back of my mind, a prowler on the outskirts of a campground.

Up front, in her purple hat, a purple dress with a big collar, a black pocketbook with an over-scored but lustrous patina, my mother looked straight ahead, playing now and then with the knob on the radio, trying to catch La Scala or New York out for a morning stroll.

She stared at nothing she might wish to have. Beside her, between her and my father in a car borrowed from my uncle, was the second pair of green herringbone knickers. Not knowing why they were there, I nevertheless felt my father’s hand in it. I wondered if there had been an argument’s movement along with the package, or behind it. Arguments I had heard, about dozens of things, then quiet discussions. Once it had been about the radio one could hardly hear. “Music has shaped me,” my mother once said, “from the very first touch to the very first clench of fist.” That’s when I

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knew she loved the brass of a band or an orchestra, not just the oompa of it, but the cold clear energy of horns clearing their throats with melodies one could only dream of.

“Toot the horn,” my mother said. “Now there’s Dolly Donovan.” Her wave was thorough and friendly. No message hung on its signal. “She’ll be at the beach. Maurice will bring her.” I did not deflect a message in that pronouncement: it came anyway. Maurice bid and Maurice done. Some laws, it seemed to say, were carved in stone. It could have said *Life is more than being made to wear green knickers*, but I wouldn’t let it.

In the rearview mirror I caught my father’s eye. “We might as well see what Forty Steps looks like today, and then come back to the beach.” The gears downshifted as he swung the corner down Boston Street in Lynn. We had come over the bridge spanning the Saugus River. In my nose the salt was alive, and pictures came with it. The gulls, by the hundreds, whipped a frenzy. Waves dashed on the rocks of Nahant, especially where Forty Steps climbed upward from the froth of water. The lobster boats, working yet, bobbed out on the Atlantic. Under sunlight majestic white sails of sloops and schooners and sailboats from Elysium, Islands of the Blessed and Marblehead darted like skaters before the wind. On that same wind brigantines and caravels and corsairs leaped from my reading, taking me away from green knickers and Nahant all the way back to Elysium and Ginnie Wilmot, the salt spray clean and sprightly and the dry vulture of taste yet in my throat from one glimpse of white underpants. Would that mystery, that sight, never go away?

The Graham, brush-painted green, lumpy for the tour of Nahant where Cabots and Rockefellers and Lowells and Longfellow himself once sat their thrones, cruised along the Nahant Causeway. In the slight breeze you could feel the sun bleaching stones, sand, the inner harbor’s glistening rocks throwing off plates of light like the backs of hippopotami caught in a satin lacquer. People dressed for church and late dinners and nights on the town walked along the beach, their

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best clothes akin to badges of some sort. "My, look at that white hat with the huge brim," my mother said, pointing out a woman holding a man's arm, three children at their heels. The girls were still giggling behind their hands, restrained while my father was driving, on their best behavior. Once on the beach they would become themselves. And I would set about de-suiting myself.

When we strolled over to the Forty Steps, the waves talking to us, the crowd of people on all approaches, I saw other boys in knickers, but no herringbone green tweed. No iron mother holding her whip and her pride in one hand. A few giggles and *harrumps* I heard, the way my grandfather could talk, making a point or two on his own. No question in my mind they were directed at my pants more than the whole suit. These people could also nod, shrug, gesture, make sense without words. I wondered what made me want to read in the first place, seeking all the adventure of new words, in this wide world of the body's semaphore, so expressive, so legitimate.

I knew it wouldn't take long, not at Nahant, not at the edge of the great ocean itself, not here where the Norsemen and Vikings and Irish sailors were flung across the seas with Europe behind shoving them relentlessly. My parents, arm in arm, walked on pavement, the girls broke free with yells, I fled down to the rocks at the ocean's edge. With an odd gesture, my mother lifted a hand to her face, as if surprise dwelt there to be touched, to be awakened, to be lifted for use. That's when I knew she was the smartest person in the whole world. She had seen it all coming, had practically choreographed the whole thing,

and my father thinking he was in control all that time. At last she had measured me against all other boys in knickers. And found something wanting.

Green is as green does, I could almost hear myself say as I slipped on the rocks heavy with seaweed still with salt, still with water, still with an unbecoming dye residing pimple-like, blister-like, pod-like, in its hairy masses. It was more like

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sitting down in puddled ink, that intentional trip, trying to be a loving son, finding it so difficult in green knickers, obeying more primal urges.

“What a mess you’ve made of yourself,” she said when she saw me, that hand still in surprise at her face. “Go up to the car and change your pants. I brought the other pair along,” *so you could get rid of them also*, she seemed to say. My father had found the horizon to his liking, the thin line of boyhood and manhood merging out there on the edge of the world; no shrug of the shoulder, no sleight of hand, but a look outward that was as well a look backward. I saw it all.

*I’m so shit lucky*, I said to myself, loving them forever, and then some.