

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4

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APPLETREE LANE

I'm sitting at the desk I used to nights after ballet class. I'd come home around 9 pm and work until midnight. I didn't realize I was lit up as if spotlights were on me until I got a strange letter. But, to go back to the beginning.

I moved to Appletree lane in September, the same month it is now though years ago. Dogwood red berries and the smell of burning applewood. Was it an omen, carrying boxes and records that my knee went thru the glass paneled door, shattering my tights, the afternoon, as in weeks my marriage would be? Weeks later, with the house we still had not sold full of dressers and hanging lights I didn't want to get rid of on Rapple Drive and one bedroom on Appletree, a mountain of books, my now ex husband ran off. He sprinted from my life with the wife of a man who had come hopefully to rent our other house to buy. She looked like a slightly younger me, wore a long skirt just like one I had. When she saw Appletree she sighed, "I would do anything to have a house like this." Apparently, she had

Living alone on Appletree—was maybe the richest time in my life, scary at times, exasperating, wonderful. I had hardly lived alone. A room by myself for a few months in graduate school didn't count. The terror or really being in charge in an unfamiliar house (the first day I found my ex had not paid the oil bill and it was late November and I had to quickly come up with a way to fix that. Then, a day later, the credit card I had to use for new tires was rejected) I vowed to keep this house. I had fallen in love with its dark wood and stained glass, fire places and a room whose floor was 2 by 4's on end. I had no idea how I could. I imagined going into the R and D Center were the man who left me worked and shooting him on a pale dove floor. Instead, I settled in and got back to writing.

My desk faced the front road, the window close to a Chinese dogwood. As I sit here writing this many years later, not that much has changed. Some birch have died. The trilliums I dug up and brought from Vermont when I spent Mother's Day with my mother a week after her mother died, spread wildly tho last winter's snow plow knocked some out.

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Almost as if to say come back, there's more here to do. My third Abyssinian cat's at the bottom of the bed looking so much like my first two who mostly grew up here. The maple drags branches into glass. Light is twisted thru stained glass. Photographs of gone lovers are still in drawers and my mother's dress, the one she wore for my wedding, hangs in the coat closet as if waiting for her to come back. I don't live here much. I'm not sure if it is still my home.

Am I the woman who waited in filmy gowns for the man who often didn't show to come in the dawn from his all night radio show? The nude girl in sketches from the recently dead folksinger-painter, the two of us still locked in a sketch in the dining room wall Jules Feiffer did? Or the woman who held her mother in her last moments, the clock's 9:46 pm tattooed in her blood? Are they me? Are any of them me?

The first neighbor I met was a tall elderly lady, always elegantly dressed, Mrs. Isabel Buell. She lived in the white clapboard across the street with the large beautiful Dalmatians she walked proudly. Within months of my new single life she invited me to a holiday party where I met a gay couple who had owned my house before the previous owners. They mourned the changes the dentist made but still loved the house. Wood smoke and lemony. They missed the room and wanted to come back. I met Isabelle's daughter and her husband who lived nearby and were often mowing her lawn. She had gorgeous flowers. In time Isabelle moved into a new smaller addition and didn't keep getting new dogs. Mr. and Mrs. Martin moved into what had been her original house. They were wonderful. He seemed to be able to fix anything. If I was away and a smoke detector came on, he came and checked it. When my car didn't make it up on a snowy day, he was here to make sure I got it into my driveway. His wife introduced my books to her book club and invited me to read. Between ballet and men and writing books, months and years tangled.

My mother came to visit driving her black Pontiac and later taking the bus. Though I saw her getting more frail and gray, without children who were born, went to school, grew up, time didn't seem as linear. The Martins were first on my Christmas card list. He with his mowers and shovels, tall and lean and it seemed to me, always smiling. And she was

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so warm and friendly too. I'm not sure if I knew exactly when Isabel, who walked less and less, stopped walking outside or anywhere else for good. The Martin boys were already tall and hot- rodding the neighborhood. I worried about my mother getting older, worried about my sister. I worried about getting pregnant, about gaining weight. I traveled for readings and workshops all over the country, edited four anthologies that always knocked me out. It was fun to be the subject of a documentary film, toured the premiere on the east and west coast and Hawaii. The night the Challenger exploded, I huddled in a former boy friend's terry cloth jacket I scorched as the January storm kept the power off for days and I listened wrapped deeply in quilts near the fire place to news and then to an all night radio man I knew I had to know.

One day the strange long long letter. Handwritten. It was about how seeing me at the window every night gave the letter writer, who turned out to be one of the Martin boys, a feeling he was not alone. He said he watched me for days, writing in the almost dark alone, as he was, and knew only I could understand him. I wanted to meet with me and talk. This gave me the creeps. I didn't know which son it was but I stopped feeling ok in the place that had been a refuge. I didn't want to insult him but I didn't want another word I put up curtains tho I never wanted them, wanted the outside to feel part of the space around my desk. Tho the house is hardly visible with thick leaves, I stopped running around nude. The intensity of his letter frightened. I had had student stalkers but this was worse. It was worse than students who came to my house at odd hours or editors pretending to be insurance salesmen.

It didn't change my life. I didn't have a lot of time to think about it. Travel, relationships, my mother's declining health, writing and publishing and publishing, difficulties with my sister, ballet—there was little time to think again about the letter. And others never followed

When I began to spend much of my time, most of my time in Virginia and came home occasionally, I always went to see the Martins. Mr. Martin was always in the yard working as before but I learn he'd given in to spending winters in Florida. Then I heard he had been tired and down. Something to do with his heart.

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I kept my plants on Appletree in the house and the mail came there as before. Someone comes to check and water and forward things on. I learned the Martins had bought smaller house across the street and bought a small one for one of their sons. I thought it might be the would be -poet-letter writer. Not long after that they moved out of the big house to the smaller rugs with the beautiful oriental rugs. Since they covered the big house, I wondered where they would fit. I still saw Mr. Martin puttering in his new lawn and checking on the flower gardens he had planted. His old ham radio station antenna went with him up the street.

By then the Martin boys had kids of their own. The one who wrote me the letter was divorced, had gone through a few girl friends and AA and was divorced and doing yard work. Cutting lawns, doing the snow plowing. He or maybe his father asked if I'd be interested in helping me with over grown pines, and maples and mulberries. Someone else was mowing and I couldn't shake the uncomfortableness I felt in the past. We all waved to each other. The fairly young man who did my lawn died suddenly but had arranged for someone else to take over. Somehow coming up with my own man, I felt less vulnerable, but still.... Someone who knew the Martin boy, now a man, said he'd had some problems but had stopped drinking and was a truly nice, reliable man. He seemed great with his kids who, surprising to me, kept getting older.

As I write this, chronology fades in and out like radio stations late at night. He came to a poetry reading I did in town with a girl friend and I was glad to see him. Last winter or maybe the winter before, after a snow storm, assured the driveway would be cleared by the man who had taken over the lawn cutter's job, but instead finding drifts deep white and impassable and this man refusing to answer his phone, George came out and said he would do the driveway with his sons so we could get in. And so from then on he's done the snow and cut the grass. Last summer I gauged my shin badly on my uneven slate stairs, to the bone, there wasn't a lot of time to look for a stone mason. When George said he'd try, I said ok. It wasn't a perfect job but no one's fallen again. When I come up with a friend from Virginia, we always chat. Then when I decided it was time to sell my beloved 86 Thunderbird with only 20,000 miles on it, George put a sign on the car and it sold in hours. This weekend, one of

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the first in mid September since I left, here to put on a new roof, George stopped by. Tho I'd planned to talk to him about some work inside the house, painting the cellar and putting in a ceiling, a part of me still felt on edge because I would have to give him a key. His parents always had one. Maybe still do. I know if he had the urge to get into my house he probably could have quiet easily and seemingly innocently. The letter was years ago.

My friend and I were in the hall talking to him about the painting inside and then about painting eaves that had to be pretty much rebuilt from ant damage and George said his parents would be moving very soon. They had been on a list to go into assisted living and it came up fast. They sold their house in a day. George said it is very sad. He said for many years he was not close to his father, talked of his father's temper, something I never saw, but said they became so close and now he hated the thought of him not being there two doors away. He would miss him being able to help him with projects and tools, said they shared so much, tools and stories. He had gotten to love being with him. He said his son's dirt bike broke down and he spent the summer rebuilding it with his grandfather, the two of them becoming so close. He said it was going to be hard not to have these long warm days all together go on. Sure his father would be in the same town but not down the street. And he worried what his father would do without a workshop and tools and things to putter with. George has the kids on weekends. One has a job now. They all have friends.

I gave George the key. He said he was going to his house to disassemble the bunk beds he put up for the boys since they would be over less and less as their own lives were starting. He shook his head, his parents were not ,ready for assisted living, they didn't need it, at least not yet. I thought how his parents had moved from at least four houses within view of my desk. I've kept mine, even there rarely as if I want nothing to change. I still have long, long hair, wear size double zero minis and take up to 20 dance classes a week . Maybe I am just more comfortable looking backward than ahead