

## Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Kim Friedman  
excerpt from

**The Other Room, a novel**

### Blue Notebook

December 4, 1999

**S**tart anywhere. There is the tiny ravel in the carpet by the doorway, down by the threshold where it catches every time the door is opened or closed. I myself have snagged it a hundred times, with the toe of my shoe, easing the gray wool further and further from the grip of its tight synthetic backing. It is still there, I am sure of it. It is one of those things you see and don't see at the same time, a thousand times a day.

Up high, in the far corner, there is a crack above the picture rail. It rises up and across the ceiling like a child's first drawing, going nowhere. It was there when I painted the room, thin as thread. I might have patched it but I did not, so arrogant was I to think I'd make it disappear with paint alone. I don't remember when it first returned. One day it was just there, like a lost dog sitting quietly by the back door. It was necessary, I suppose. It is as much a part of the room as anything else.

Follow the crack to the place where it disappears and you will find the first star. You might have missed it had I not pointed it out, but there are several, a sky full, scattered like seeds across the high ceiling: the palest of yellow, nearly white, but they are there, I am sure of it. Turn out the light and you will see. I can picture them even now, even after all that's happened, so close you'd think you could reach up and pluck them like flowers. We placed them there one night long ago – Josef teetering high up on the ladder and Lily jumping up and down on her bed, eyes wide with wonder, chubby fingers stretching high above her head to touch the sky.

There is more to tell, much more. It has been five years now, to the day. But we will save the rest. These things take time, of course. That is to be expected. Stories like this should never be rushed.

Claudia

November, 1997

*I dream about touch. Simple touch, like two fingers on a cheek, or a head resting on a broad, warm chest. Often it is you, but it doesn't have to be: there are others. We walk along a river or we lie on the grass or we find each other across the distance of a lifetime and then we touch, like it had to be, like that is all there is. Like the touch of a suckling baby as she reaches up and follows her eyes to her mother's smiling lips.*

*There is such joy in it that when I wake up I must regroup, recalibrate my needs and my desires. I lie in bed and let it wash over me one last time*

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*before I wrap it up and put it away: another night, another time. It is too much to bring into the day, too clean, as pure and mocking as a primary color. Something that would burn if you held it too close or looked at it straight on, like the sun.*

"So, when do you want to come back in?" He ends with a question, always the same, the appointment book suddenly open on his lap. His hands are busy now and his face dropped, awaiting her verdict, hiding any possibility of emotion. She's slow to give him an answer.

"Next week, I guess. Same time if you have it."

"Okay then." He's nodding and leading her to the door, the distance safe between them. "Take care of yourself."

And she's standing once again out in the snow.

It took Claudia almost six months to see the Jackson Pollock above the couch, an angry, oversized paint-splatter in yellows and blacks, running nearly the length of the far wall. She walked in one February morning and asked if it was new.

He shook his head, eyes smiling.

"Everybody seems to wonder the same thing sooner or later."

"Hm." She grinned. "Takes us a little while from this side of the room."

He smiled with her, nodding with his eyes, her signal that they are in this thing together. Her eyes drop down to her hands, still red and chapped with cold, then over to the clock up on the wall.

"Where we going today?" she asks. Her mind has already begun to squirm, her eyes tiptoe up the staircase of diplomas on the wall. As she has so many times before, she wonders absently if he knows what it is he is doing.

"You tell me."

It is also the same every time, this edgy opening dance. It's when he sits safe and sure in the armor of his profession, lets his training do the talking, waiting for her to make her first move. She watches him watching her. He is very good. She has known him a long time now and has only seen him make one or two mistakes.

This is what he knows about her after nearly three years of this: She is 39 years old, unhappily married, and prone to depression – mother of a dead child and child of a dead mother, an empty hand on either side. She has given him this, in bits and pieces, sometimes willingly, sometimes not. He understands that she is alone, that she has been broken, that she carries the twisted, ugly scars of too many emotional collisions, and he believes that she has offered him more of herself than she has ever given to anyone else in her life.

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This is what she knows about him: He is 44 years old, and he has much more on the line than she does.

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The room itself is underground, the first surprise among many when she'd walked into his office that first cold October morning. In the weeks and months that followed she came to realize that there was a certain logic to it, a certain rightness, but at the time it only struck her as cheap and a little tacky that someone would hammer out a living in the basement of a suburban home. There was the Oriental carpet on the floor, and tasteful modern art and leather furniture, but nothing prepared her for the walk down into a room where the only light that shone was under his control, plugged into a wall, fitted out with a dimmer switch that hung discretely by his right hand.

He sits in a low, beige swivel chair, modern and oversized, and she faces him across the faded rug from a matching beige sofa. It's furniture she would never own, furniture that sucks the life and air out of the room, furniture that says: *I have no opinion*. She looks from the chair to the man and wonders what it says about him, this person who sits before her in clothes that make a similar statement. Khakis and knock-off Topsiders. His face, she notes, is unremarkable, neither handsome nor plain, with white-blond hair thinning at the top and a well-groomed beard. His eyes are steady but pale, a noncommittal blue, and like the furniture he appears somewhat larger than the room can comfortably accommodate. When he greets her at the door he slumps, as though he knows he's too big for the space that he occupies.

Their sessions have an organic quality to them, each one growing in its own direction, responding to the elements she tosses in like kindling to the fire.

"I had a dream this week."

Eyebrows raised. No comment.

"Should I tell you about it?"

"You want to tell me about it?"

Frowning: "You're doing the shrink thing, Stuart."

Slight smile but again no comment.

She pauses for a moment to let her mind settle, to steady the panic that uncurls its tiny, wizened fingers. He has never been one to help her out, and she understands his reasons: It brings her where she needs to be. It reminds them both of what they are to one another. But it is the same every time and she is at a loss, recalculating their relationship at every word and every nuance, never asking the questions that beg to be asked.

It startles her at times how much he owns her, how much of herself she has given away: how exposed she has become. It has only been three years, but there is little she does not tell him, and of what she does there is little that is not true. Of course there are places where she dances, tip-toeing round his questions like shiny patches of poison ivy, but they are scarce nowadays and have as much to do with him as with her. What is

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more important is that she has found a place in him where she can hear her own voice, hear it as something electric and sharp, and it is a hard place to leave when the minute hand swings itself around once again to mark the hour.

"What if I told you it was about you?"

She watches his face for a reaction and gets no more than the questioning eyebrows. His shoe traces a small circle in the air.

"We weren't in this room," she begins, settling herself back into the sofa and staring up at the splash of lamplight on the ceiling. "We were in Ohio, back in the house where I grew up, and we were sitting up in my room just talking like this. Only you were sitting at my desk, kind of hunched over in the little chair, and I was on the bed with my legs pulled up to my chest and my head resting on my knees; I wasn't really looking you square in the face. My mom and Lily were there, too, which seemed a little strange to me since they never even knew each other. Anyhow, they were playing quietly over in the corner, and we were just talking, just like any other session, and then the next thing I know you're over on the bed next to me, just kind of leaning back and looking up at the ceiling with me, your feet still on the floor. And I guess I'm talking, or you're talking, but after a minute or two you kind of reach over and pull me back down so I'm lying there in the crook of your arm. It's warm under my back, like something that's been held too close to the fire – much warmer than my own skin. And we're still talking, really low now though, almost whispering, like two people talking in bed late at night. And the weird thing is none of it feels wrong. It feels...not-wrong, you know?" She cocks her head and squints. "The opposite of wrong. And maybe that's not the same thing as right, but somehow it doesn't matter. You're exactly where you're supposed to be. And so am I."

She's quiet for a long minute, wrestling for the words she still needs to say.

"The funny part is, that's all there was to it, really. We just needed to feel each other's skin like that, just for those few moments. And then when it came time for you to leave, we just stood up together and held hands for a minute, and then I walked you downstairs and let you out the front door."

For the first time she looks over at him. Her face is relaxed now, her eyes level and unashamed.

"The thing is, it was the saddest dream I've ever had in my life. And when you turned around on the front walk to blow me a kiss, I stood in the doorway and shook my head, just the slightest little bit as though I didn't want anyone to see, like I was trying to stop it with just the look in my eyes. And then you stood there for a minute with your hand still on your mouth, not knowing what to do with it, and then you turned around and walked away."

It's quiet in the room, as quiet as quiet gets, and they stare at one another across the space that defines them, daring each other to speak, the furniture and the paintings and the walls falling away. She says everything with her eyes but she will never ask the question, not here, and he will never answer unless he is asked.

"So, where should we begin?"

Begin at the beginning.

Our daughter died when she was two, her arms and legs still ringed with cushions of fat, her mind still straining with the mysteries of the English language. When she woke in the mornings she smelled of baby sweat and urine, black ringlets of hair plastered against the side of her face, head and shoulders hanging slack over the side of her trundle bed. We both used to lie with her there, sliding into sleep most nights while her breathing slowed and steadied beside us. Curling tight to the warmth of her small body like two hands cupped carefully around a flame.

When I think of her now that is where I always go, back to the nights, back to the close smells of her small room and the milky glow of her night-light. Sometimes still, when Josef is out, I go into her room and plunge my face into her pillow, trying to find her smell, trying to remember the dampness of her cheek against my shoulder. But even as I crack the door and shatter the silence, I know that it is only a room, a small, cold room with no smell, the bed made up tightly as if for guests, toys picked up and hidden away. Windows and shades closed tight to a world that used to beckon her each morning like an unopened gift.

I never asked where the toys went, or the clothes. Maybe Josef took care of it, sitting in a heap on the floor one morning while I stared out my office window at the city below, watching it turn from purple to orange to gray, listening to the phone ring and stop ringing. One day they just disappeared, like the tricycle out back, and the Little Mermaid towel that hung in the bathroom by the Peter Rabbit soap and the baby shampoo. In a way it has all been like waking from a dream, the edges gradually falling away, the details slipping one by one so that all you are left with are the feelings themselves, and a sense that something important has been lost along the way. Sometimes, in the night, I wake up in a hard, cold sweat, panting like a wild thing, frantic that I have forgotten to leave milk by the side of Lily's bed.

Now, when I sleep, I prefer to touch nothing. We seem to understand this, Josef and I, and we find our places on separate sides of the bed, pecking each other goodnight before we hide away from the terror of skin against skin, as though the gravity that used to hold us together has somehow been turned inside out. It has been nearly three years now, the days lurching one after the other and the world coming slowly into focus, like something viewed through an arm's length of water. It is no longer the cold, black tunnel it was at the beginning: I can see and hear life around me, walk through it as though I belong, but I can no longer feel it brush up against me or take me by the hand, and I know that when I kiss my husband goodbye in the mornings I am playing the role, blocking my steps and reciting my lines like the stand-in for the leading lady.

From the start I understood that one does not recover from the death of a child. It is only that one continues to live. We have never stopped living, Josef and I, and I wonder at times whether that is a sign of strength or of weakness. Maybe it is not enough to fill your cereal bowl in the morning. Maybe that is just something we do to keep our minds busy and our hands full.

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Josef waits for her at the sandwich shop across the street. When she arrives she can tell at a glance that he is angry; that she's done something to displease him. She breezes in and drops her bag onto the small table, kissing him lightly on the forehead and sliding herself into the empty wicker chair.

"You forgot to drop off the license plates."

He's already eating, and he says it without looking up, grunting into his half-eaten sandwich. She flinches someplace deep inside and speaks before she is ready.

"I *couldn't*, Josef" she says with forced exasperation. "I've been flat out all morning—"

"You said your ten o'clock was cancelled. We were supposed to meet at the Registry."

"Oh, shit, I'm so sorry. I completely forgot."

He doesn't say anymore, but she hears the accusations anyway: I had a case. I wasted half the morning. You fucked up again.

"You've got the registration papers?" It's more a statement than a question, and he places it before her like a sharp object. She opens her bag and rifles through the debris as if she actually expects to find them inside.

"I'm sure I put them in here somewhere. I could have sworn I picked them up before I left the house this morning. You're sure you didn't grab them?"

He stares at her before answering, waiting for her to look up from the mess she's made on the table. His eyes are hard and flat.

"You don't have them."

"I really thought I grabbed them. I was in such a rush this morning but I thought I threw them in my bag —"

She feels him rise, feels his shadow spread itself like a dull ache across the table, and she is powerless to look up. He drops five dollars onto the remains of his lunch and walks out into the street.

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When she arrives home that evening, she's greeted by the sounds and smells of something cooking out back. Onions, maybe, and mushrooms. Something considered. She allows herself a small smile, a slackening of tensed muscles. It's a good sign, and she calls cheerfully into the kitchen as she tosses her coat into the front hall closet. She doesn't hear his reply, but the music is on and she winds her way back without hesitation, slipping in on the chorus of *Killing Me Softly* as she rounds the corner into the kitchen. He's cooking an omelet on the stove, and he doesn't look up.

"I'm going out."

"You are?" She's taken aback, her smile wiped clean.

Flatly: "Um-hmm. I'm going back in to the hospital."

"Oh," she says quietly, busying her hands now with the dishes in

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the sink. As usual he's cooked all over the kitchen; half-chopped onions and peppers and broken eggshells hug the countertop in sticky clumps. "Look, Josef, I'm *really* sorry about the mix-up to—"

"There was no mix-up," he says coldly.

She watches out of the corner of her eye as he opens a beer and slides the omelet skillfully onto his plate; disappears into the den. There is no invitation. The door slams behind him, and she startles, drops a paring knife to the floor. Through the wall she hears the TV, the sharp staccato of channels being switched and then the steady reassuring drone of Peter Jennings. Josef eats by himself in front of the news and leaves without saying goodbye.

Claudia folds her arms across her chest and sighs, takes a long, hard look at the wreckage he's left behind: the plates and the pans and the empty jug of milk; the half-stick of butter, half-melted on the stovetop; the waterfall of egg white by the sink. Irritably she tosses the dishes into the sink and runs the water until it is hot enough to scald; stares into the steam. Outside, the sound of his engine. From the window, Claudia sees the red of his taillights, lurching out of the driveway and racing up the street into the night.

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She wakes to the feeling of it pressed against her thigh, full and urgent, as desperately alive as a small animal rooting for its mother. It swells and gyrates inside loose skin, plumping itself until it sits between them like a statement, like a challenge, like a fist. There's no use pretending anymore; sleep will not quiet this thing once it has begun. She has learned that it is more powerful than her needs, more powerful than her will to resist it. It will have its way with her, and then perhaps they can all go back to sleep again.

She can scarcely remember now when she stopped wanting. There were years of nights when they'd come alive together deep into the dark, flaring brightly like the joining of two candles. Back then the days were like foreplay, slow and sweet and plodding, winks and nods and stolen smiles, the brushing of skin against skin. But the nights: The nights were like the arrival itself, the coming, the coming upon, the beginning and the ending. The nights took care of themselves.

But here she lies, awake now, eyes fixed and teeth clenched, waiting as he tries to bring her along. They have taught each other certain things in these many years, things about love and sex and accommodation. He has learned the power of presumption and blind persistence, and she, for her part, has learned the efficiency of resignation. He wedges a warm hand against her crotch and rubs her with the heel of his palm, purposefully, bluntly, and she feels herself soften under his steady pressure. There is little joy in it, only a sense of wonder at how the body takes care of itself; how little the connection matters. Even now there is anger, and bitterness and fatigue, and still she is soft, still he enters her without resistance. Still her muscles pull him to her like a powerful undertow.

When he is done he reaches down with sluggish fingers, tries to focus his efforts on that patch of her that he has long-since claimed as his own.

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He's always been willing to give her what he takes for himself, but her reaction these days is to deflect, to remove, to turn away. To scream into the silence. Besides, he is clumsy now, and his fingers move like sleepy children, and his arm hangs like a sandbag across her tiny waist.

Anyhow it is not about release for her. Not now. Not anymore. She knows that he is waiting, that it is an effort, that most of him is asleep already. So it is about humiliation. It is like masturbation, or oral sex: coming without a partner. Without eyes to look into. Something that has always made her feel common and dirty. She slides her hand onto his and gently brings it up around her belly, her signal that he is released, that there are no obligations. Like a belch, or a fart, he heaves a sleepy I-love-you and throws a heavy leg across her hips. Crushing her with his weight. Leaving her straining and lurching into the night like a temperamental child.

Ever since her last depression, Claudia has awoken to the powerful insult of her own breath. It's like a reminder: a barometer of her own internal weather, something beyond the reaches of therapy or Prozac. She's come to the point where she's learned to make room for this problem, wiping the dried, foul-smelling crust from the corners of her mouth before her eyes have even opened. If Josef speaks to her she answers into her hand, or curls into a ball and speaks down into her chest.

That is all that is left of it, now. This last time the symptoms had subsided on schedule, the way one would hope; she is eating and sleeping in all the right proportions, and the weight has come back. She looks great, Josef says, his hand on her breast, and she smiles when they go out to dinner with their friends on Saturday nights. No one would ever guess, Josef says, no one could ever have imagined. She's back to normal. Josef says. So that is all that is left of it, now, just the mornings, just the sour taste of acid and bile and undigested dreams.

He stands behind her at the mirror today, straightening his red tie as she combs out her long, black hair. He towers over her – a head taller, barrel-chested and thick around the neck and shoulders.

"I see a gray one," he teases.

"You're joking."

"No, really, it's right at the top."

She drops her head and tries to find it in the mirror.

"I can't see that high. Yank it for me."

He tugs and hands her the strand, long and white and kinked. It's such a startling contrast to the curtain of black hair that falls to her shoulders that Claudia winces visibly.

"Shit!" she says. "When did this happen?"

Josef shrugs. "Don't know. I'm pretty sure it's grounds for divorce."

He waits for her smile but she's absorbed, twisting the hair and frowning as it winks back at her in the thin morning light. Dropping his arms,



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he turns her slowly toward him, tips her face up toward his with the back of one hand. He smiles – sweetly, indulgently – his dark eyes curling up at the corners.

“I love your gray hair, do you know that? I love your black hair and I love your gray hair! I love every hair on your head. I love the scalp that holds every hair on your head. I love the neck that holds the head that holds the scalp that holds the hair...Do you see where I’m going with this?!...”

Claudia scowls and pulls away, draws her mouth down into an exaggerated pout.

“Well, do me a favor: If you love the gray ones so much, they’re yours. Just pluck them whenever you see them. You can start a collection.”

“Deal! We’ll do a thorough check later on. I’ll start with your pubic hair – we can look for lice at the same time.”

“Get out!!” She swats him hard on the arm with the back of her hair-brush.

He lunges for the door then turns. Impulsively he reaches back and grabs at her crotch, pulling her to him and kissing her, hard, on the mouth. “I love this thing,” he hisses. “Do you know that? I love this!” He’s grinning broadly now, squeezing her tightly between his fingers. She pushes him roughly toward the door, but he lingers, his eyes tracing her lines in the mirror.

“Hey, you want to go out this weekend – just the two of us?”

Claudia catches his eye in the mirror and shrugs.

“We could have dinner in the city maybe. I’m going to be flat out until Thanksgiving.”

“I’m helping Amy out across the street all day Saturday. Saul has to go into the Hebrew Home next week, and she’s packing up the whole house. I don’t know how late that’ll go. Plus we have plans with Lisa and Jay for Friday night, remember? We’ve cancelled on them twice already.”

“Cancel on them again; I want to go out alone. With you, I mean. My beautiful wife.”

“You cancel on them if you want to so badly.”

She shoots him a look, and Josef pulls a face, pushes out his lower lip.

“Forget it...I just thought—”

“Josef...Go to work, Josef.”

He turns and stoops his shoulders, shuffling toward the door like an old man.

“This is Josef, going to work, rebuffed by his lovely wife of 12½ years.”

“Oh Jesus, give me a break...”

Her voice is careful, equivocal, walking a thin line between irritation and play. As he disappears around the corner, Claudia turns back to the mirror and opens her hand, waits for the silver-white hair to float down

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and away, but there it stays, sticking to the sweat that's gathered in the tiny creases. She shakes her hand, once, twice, the loose end jerks its way back to her sticky palm and laces between her fingers, gathering in the shiny valley that's formed beneath her wedding band. She's irritated now and overtired; fed up with the entire morning. Impatiently she plucks at the hair with her other hand, cursing under her breath as it stretches and snaps in two, one half falling away, the other caught in a snarl between her finger and her ring.

Claudia thrusts her hands down under the running faucet, floating her eyes gingerly over the twin scars that ribbon the insides of her slender wrists. It's like pale silk now – the skin there so pearled and smooth it makes something flutter inside. Abruptly she withdraws her hands from the basin, shakes them roughly at her sides as she flips the hair out of her face. She glances one last time into the mirror, turning to examine her profile: the snug fit of her sweater, the high, full breasts. The dark evening lipstick that she's applied and then blotted to remove all of the shine and most of the color.

### Blue Notebook

December 18, 1999

In the end of course we had no choice. Like slender trees far beneath the canopy, we were both straining for air, scratching and clawing for some promise of sunlight far overhead. We could tell that there was life up there, screeching and flying and flashing its garish colors. There was no end of life. We should have known that only one of us could survive it.

I wake now in a place I never dreamed to find myself, the air perfumed so thickly it hurts my lungs to inhale it. Outside my window, by noon, or one, I hear the hard, brown buzz of the cicadas, urgent and callous, and by evening the screech and caw of birds I never thought to share my life with. But they are there, electric blue, slicing through the air like small nightmares, reminding me over and over again that I am the stranger in this place. It was all I could do, to leave. To find a place where I could set myself down and inch myself back into the earth, find sustenance in things I'd never known. There are wild orchids here by the road, growing like dandelions, nearly lost in the tangle of pulpy, green kudzu that sheets the island like a heavy shroud. And more than once I have seen a mongoose look left and then right as he crosses my path, humping along on lazy legs. If he eyes me at all it is with utter indifference, or slit-eyed boredom, I do not know which, and I suppose it does not really matter anyhow.

Maybe I was meant to return here all along. Antigua – even the name whispers turbulence and frenzy. It has been two years now, and it is no less a home than anywhere else. The woman at the milk store smiles at me and chatters in her sweet falsetto, gold tooth flashing like a small beacon, the groceries finding their way into my fishnet bag and onto my small stove and eventually, I am not sure how, into some small part of me that still demands to be fed. It is the same part that still watches myself in the mirror as I brush my teeth, one tiny, tensed lizard perched on the

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showerhead by my shoulder. I smile to him. He cranes his neck to and fro, watching me watching him, the bulb in his throat pulsing in and out like a grotesque erection. We claim the same space, he and I. Nowadays, we breathe the same flaccid air.

In one sense it is little wonder I am here, that I came back, that my body has found a way to return. The house has been waiting – patiently, mindfully – the sky has been whispering my name. When we were young our mother brought us here, every summer, my sister and me. My grandfather was born here, in the room off to the right, my mother went to school out in the convent down the road. There are two aunties and their daughters and a nephew with one arm, there is a dizzying array of brown-eyed babies. This place runs thick and deep with family blood. So I have found my way to them and they are here, behind my eyes, beneath my sleep.

They are waiting.

I am waiting.

But waiting for what I could not say.