

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

a novel by Kim Friedman

The Other Room (Installment #2)

Josef

November 1997

There's something wrong with his left eye. For the past week it's been watering, constantly, so much so that he's taken to carrying around an old handkerchief of his father's, which he folds neatly into the side pocket of his khaki pants. He'd finally been to see the ophthalmologist and was told it was a blocked tear duct, which he'd already guessed, and that an operation was required. Even with surgery, the chances the eye would recover were only about fifty-fifty.

That was only this afternoon, but already Josef's decided against it. Like most surgeons he knows he's never actually been on the other side of the knife, never been under anesthesia at all. Deep down, he carries the slippery fear of all the stories he's heard and told over the years, the mishaps. He knows what his patients choose to ignore: that medicine is an imperfect science, that the best kind of surgery is no surgery at all.

He could live with a watery eye.

There were worse things in the world.

Walking back up toward Grand Central he decides to stop and call Claudia. Since this last depression, she's been working more and more at home, and he knows the afternoons are hardest for her, especially this time of year. Already the sky's begun to lose its oyster-colored glare, what passes for daylight in mid-November. It'll be dark within the hour.

"Claudie. It's me."

"Hey. How's the eye?"

He hears a sluggishness in her voice, like packing.

"Not great. Jerry said he can operate, but there's no guarantee it'll work."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't want to talk about it. Listen, I'm catching an early train – I told Lynn to reschedule my last few patients. Thought you and I could go out for a quick bite tonight, maybe even catch a movie."

She hesitates on the other end, just a heartbeat, just enough so that he feels the grinding of teeth against teeth.

"You still there?" His voice is weary already, awaiting the response he's heard a thousand times, a million times, every day now for nearly three years.

"Yeah. I'm kind of beat though, Josef. I don't know about going out. We can talk when you get home...See you in an hour."

She hangs up before he has a chance to say good-bye.

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He pulls out his handkerchief and blots at the tear that has run down the side of his face.

At the Tarrytown station, Josef jumps into his VW convertible and cranks up the heat, knowing that it will first blast him with frigid air. It's bitter, the coldest November on record. The digital thermometer at the station reads 18 degrees F, and he's forgotten both mittens and hat. He blows into his hands and then fumbles in his pocket for his key ring, slips the key clumsily into the ignition. The radio turns over with the engine, stepping in on the familiar jingle of National Public Radio, and he flips it off before he has a chance to hear today's headlines. Shivering, he guns the engine a few times and lurches out into the traffic on Route Nine.

It's become his favorite time of the day, these minutes in the car. Without defining it for himself he's allowed this short, empty space to become its own escape – the one time in the day that he can feel himself breathing, feel his thoughts slow and settle and deconstruct altogether. He sits very still, eyes trained on the car up ahead, displacing as little air as he knows how. For a few long moments, he allows the rest of the world to fall away entirely.

Passing through the center of town, he realizes for the first time that the shops are already lit for Christmas. Small piles of dirty snow cling to the curbside, melted and refrozen into hard, lumpy mounds. They've added new lampposts, he notices, designed to look like old-fashioned gas lamps. Wrought-iron benches now dot the wide, cobbled sidewalks, inviting the holiday shoppers to huddle picturesquely in the cold. Storefronts wink and sparkle under garlands of fairy lights.

"*Christ!*" he mutters, then laughs to himself at his choice of expletives. It's a part of the year he'd just as soon see ripped from the calendar. Even in the best of times it's tested him, with its requirements for pomp and good cheer and family bonding. But since Lily's death it's carried a kind of weight, and density, an opaqueness that settles itself thickly over his soul, sealing it off from any prospect of light, or air. At every turn, in every room, he finds himself bumping into ghosts – small, tidy piles of anguish that he thought had long since been picked up and put away.

As usual, he hasn't thought about presents, or Christmas for that matter. It's always something that comes upon him abruptly, like the answer to a difficult problem: stunning him with the simple fact of itself. There are only two people he has to consider, admittedly. There is Claudia, of course, and this year there is Kiera. That hasn't really occurred to him until just now, and it pains him someplace deep inside, so that he shifts his heavy frame in the leather seat as though to ease an ache in his lower back. He wonders, for a brief, frantic moment, how he will manage it: Buy for them both in the same jewelry store? Pay with cash? Ask the sales woman to wrap them separately? It's only a moment, and then he realizes with both relief and shame that he is being idiotic. That this is the least of what he has gotten himself into.

There was never a question of falling in love. He was never open to that, not then, not now. He had needed someone to fuck, and that's what he had found. He had a way of talking to Kiera without looking at her,

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half of him turned someplace else, one eye on the door, as though he had only the time or the patience for his half of the conversation. As far as he had analyzed it, which wasn't much, she was a distraction, a sedative, something to help him through another night, another winter. Nothing more.

He'd seduced her easily enough. He was hardly aware he was doing so at all until he found his arm around her back, leading her purposefully into a dark, midtown bar. It had surprised him, how easy it had been. It had never occurred to him that things like this could happen, could be made to happen, that lives did not always proceed along bold, predictable lines. She was more than willing, her slim, athletic body catching the rhythm of the jazz, moving slightly under his steady pressure. He could tell right away she liked sex; he could sense it in the way she squirmed in her seat, like a hyperactive child. She was not afraid to look him in the eye. They both knew what they were about to do.

He let himself drink enough to allow the rest to happen, his dark eyes wet and alive, the rest of him set off at a pleasant distance, watching with a kind of bemused curiosity as his life unfolded before him. Her face was almost plain, and narrow, but her red-blond hair fell to her shoulders in a cloud of loose curls, and her green eyes crinkled when she smiled, a thin line of pink gum peeking out above her upper teeth. From the start he could feel the imbalance between them: small surges of panic fanning across her face as she tried to keep up, groping urgently for the right word, the right reaction, the appropriate tilt of earnestness or play. In small fits of discomfiture she would turn away from the hard edge of his half-grin, her freckled hands hopping around the table like injured birds.

They left the dance floor, hardly looking at one another, his hand already moving purposefully across her narrow back. She was shorter than Claudia, and she slid easily under his arm, presumptuously, huddling there as he flagged a taxi, shivering against the evening cold. It had started to rain. The drops slanted into his face, stinging him like needles, so that he dropped his head and hid behind his upheld arm as they dashed into the cab. She gave the driver her address, and they traveled silently down toward Chelsea, Josef staring fixedly out the side window and shuffling in his pocket for change. He could feel her eyes on him, tugging at his face, roving across the planes and angles of his forehead, his cheekbones, the indentation at the base of his throat. He was glad for the third drink now. He allowed himself to settle back into it like a favorite chair, lose himself in its well-worn contours. Shifting slightly toward the window, he made himself cough; cleared his throat loudly to fill some of the empty space.

His first thought on entering her apartment was that she'd been expecting him. It was like a hotel, freshly made up, the rugs neatly vacuumed so that the lines still held in the nap of the carpet. There was something too precious, too coral-colored about it, soporific, as forgettable as a public lobby. It was an apartment a single woman would have, he thought contemptuously: too considered, the result of too much empty time. Framed museum posters hung neatly on the walls, lit up by discrete tracks, with nothing in any of them to quicken the pulse. Like wallpaper, he mused, or

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fencing. He smiled to himself. On her refrigerator were pictures of someone else's babies.

Kiera dropped her bag on the hallway table and motioned him into the kitchen.

"Grab the bottle of wine out of the fridge. I want to get out of my scrubs."

To his right was a cramped kitchen, two high wooden stools pulled up snugly to a Formica-topped island. The sink was empty, rinsed clean, the sponges piled neatly by the splashboard. When he opened the fridge he saw her two-liter bottles of Diet Coke and her pre-cooked meals, stacked and labeled in Tupperware containers. The wineglasses he found above the narrow gas range, arranged in precisely staggered rows. The counters were wiped to a high gloss. A canister of air freshener stood guard by the refrigerator.

"There's some good cheese in there if you're hungry."

She was standing at the doorway to the kitchen, in jeans now and a V-neck sweater, smelling more strongly of perfume than before. Josef was used to seeing her in the O.R., just a pair of green and gold eyes over a pink surgical mask, her wild hair all but invisible under the tight grip of her cap. Now it had been brushed so that the curls looked softer, gauzy, and he reached up to touch them with the back of his hand.

She giggled, nervously; reached across him to the cupboard above the sink.

"Let me just find some crackers. I've got some in here some—"

He took her wrist in his hand and lowered it gently to her side, staring hard into her eyes and shaking his head. "Not hungry," he murmured. He handed her a glass of wine and kissed her hard on the mouth before she had a chance to take a sip. Behind her he could see through the doorway to her bedroom. The bed was neatly made, with a pink-checked coverlet and a small mountain of lace-covered pillows. There would be a teddy bear, he suspected, or an old china doll, a picture of her parents in a frame by the bedside.

Kiera was new to the hospital. She'd come in a few months before with a fresh crop of scrub nurses, most of them relocated from the recent merger. She was older than the rest but only by a few years – 29 or 30, he'd guessed; marrying age. He could tell she was a girl who'd been dumped by men: she was not quite beautiful but with a gorgeous body, high breasts and thin hips, and she seemed to try just a little too hard. When he spoke she looked at him earnestly, eyebrows pinched, and when she laughed, he could tell she was keenly aware that a laugh was called for. All of her reactions seemed once-removed.

But when they found their way to the bedroom, she was a stronger version of herself. He could tell she liked her body: the way she pranced to the bathroom with nothing on and straddled him with her breasts held high, unfazed by the overhead light. She liked being on top, setting the pace, her small, tight breasts staring down at him. Claudia had always shrunk from his stare, folding her arms around her heavy breasts as

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though they were something to be protected, or ashamed of. When they made love at all these days, it was only in the darkest part of night, thick with sleep, when they would stumble upon one another as if by accident, like total strangers.

That night Josef had let himself be fucked. It was something new for him, allowing a woman to take control. There was relief in it – the giving in, the giving over. It felt effortless, knowing that they shared in the wanting, knowing that in his taking he was not taking away; she was not losing. But when they were through he pulled her head down against his chest so he would not have to look her in the eyes. And when she spoke to him t he listened with only half an ear, one eye on the door, his attention rooted to the narrative he was carrying on in his own head. Absently he smoothed Kiera's hair with his hand, allowed himself to forget that she was anything other than a warm body next to his: a hand against his chest, a slender knee between his legs. He tried to quiet his racing thoughts by running through tomorrow's cases in his mind.

Josef thought about leaving an hour or so before he actually did. When the time came he moved slowly, standing up unsteadily under the burden of what he'd just begun. She watched him, carefully, her freckled hands clutching tightly to a wad of pink bed sheet.

"Early morning?"

"Um. Case at 7:00."

"I'll be in too." Her voice was sharper now, forced-casual, trying to contain itself. "I'm on days this week, through the end of the month."

No response. She tried to make conversation, but he was not prepared to go there now. He'd taken his eyes with him, staring intently at his belt, his shoes, the mess they'd made around them on the floor. The apartment was over-warm, and he felt a sudden flush of irritation as she followed him with her eyes across the room. It was late. He slid his polo shirt over his head, bent down to tie his shoes. In his mind he was already lumbering up Seventh Avenue toward the subway stop, leaning heavily into the wind, straining under the added ballast of the lies and the guilt he'd just taken on.

If he had intentions at all he didn't share them that first night. He kissed her goodbye at her door, hands bunched deep in his pockets, trying his best to avoid her eyes. There were questions there, he knew; already they hovered around him like silent accusations. Her satin bathrobe slipped off her shoulder, exposing her right breast, and he looked at it sadly for a moment or two before he turned around and walked away.

To his profound relief, Claudia was asleep when he'd tiptoed into their bedroom. She was so used to his late-night comings and goings that an explanation would have seemed out of place anyway. As he had so many times before he slipped into bed next to her, and she curled away from him in her sleep, her slender foot easing itself out from beneath the covers. She sighed heavily. Outside, a single car sped up the street, stopping short at the stop sign and then racing off into the night. Josef looked out

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to where the street lamp shone at the corner and noticed for the first time that the rain had finally stopped.

Tonight he finds her stretched out on the living room sofa. Her eyes are closed, but he can tell she isn't sleeping; only her body is quiet. There's a bound manuscript splayed open against her chest, and he watches it rise and fall with her slow, even breaths.

"Claudia." It's neither a question nor a statement, only a noise, something that rasps and catches at the back of his throat. He reaches over to switch on the piano lamp but then thinks better of it. She opens her eyes in the almost-dark, watches as he picks his way over to the couch and lowers himself down next to her.

"Were you sleeping?"

"No. Just drifting." Her voice is husky and slow, her lying-down voice, and he raises a hand and drapes it lightly across her forehead.

"Where'd you go this time?"

"Nowhere special." He can hear the smile in her voice, and he reaches over and squeezes her fingers, gently. He leans back into her and rubs his thumb lightly across her lips, tracing the line of her jaw with the backs of his fingers.

"We don't have to go out tonight. We're going out Friday anyhow. I'll just wok something up for us."

She sighs, heavily, closing her eyes again and curling into a comma. Across the room Liam, their old Irish setter, stands stiffly and approaches the sofa.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say. About dinner, I mean. I started editing this last chapter and fell asleep – never even made it to the market."

"Don't worry about it. I'll just find something in the fridge."

"No...I mean I needed to order some things for Thanksgiving."

"Oh. You have plenty of time – it's a week and a half away. What do we have to bring down this year?"

"The turkey!"

"Ahh – the turkey, right! That's all?"

"Mmh...more or less. Yvonne's in charge."

Josef rolls his eyes.

"That's how she likes it – leave everything to the good sister." There's an edge to his voice, but a smile, too.

"Hey – we all have our roles to play. I just take my orders and shut up."

"Yeah, but who do you suppose handed out the assignments?"

Claudia hesitates then giggles: "Yvonne."

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They both laugh, playfully, and Josef suddenly feels her presence beside him like a sharp sting. There is so little that she gives away these days that even these small moments carry with them more than their weight in pleasure and pain. He finds he can no longer laugh with her without feeling the absence of laughter, can no longer look upon her without seeing her fade and disappear before his very eyes. The laughter more than anything – that is what they have lost. He looks over at her now and sees the light in the corner of her eye, the shower of wrinkles around the edges of her mouth that speak of the smile in between. Like a sob, he catches his breath and swallows hard, feeling her beauty like a wound. He leans over and kisses her tenderly on the mouth. She closes her eyes, sighing heavily, and kisses him back.

Josef stares at her across the bed. Her hair is loose, her fist is screwed up tight beneath her chin. She's been asleep for hours. He leans toward her in the almost-dark, reaches out and lifts the covers gently from her back. Her body stirs then settles with a sigh. He drifts his eyes – the slender waist, the shallow dip before the swelling of her hips. He pulls his face down close beside her neck and breathes her in, careful not to touch. He is hard. His penis throbs between his legs, beneath the fingers of one hand. With a weak moan, he reaches out. Traces the soft, pale swelling of his wife's moonlit breast.

Gingerly he eases out of bed and pulls the blankets back around her neck. Claudia sighs into her pillow, throws one leg across the far side of the bed. That is all; she's been asleep for hours. It is only Liam now, half-awake, his ears pulled up, his nose, his tail brushing limply at the floor. Josef kneels down, strokes the dog tenderly across his back. He's made a bed of dirty clothes by the door. Josef pats at the soft pile; Liam drops his head obediently down onto the nest of his crossed paws.

Pushing himself back up to a stand, Josef snags the waistband of Claudia's panties on the chapped skin of his thumb. He pauses for a moment, dangling the limp twist of nylon back and forth between his fingers. He draws a breath, brings it close up to his face. With the other hand he reaches carefully along the bureau for the portable phone. Lifts it off its cradle and slips quietly out into the hall.

Carefully Josef pulls the door closed behind him, just shy of the latch. He looks left toward the bathroom then turns the other way, takes the step or two to Lily's room. The door's already cracked. He pushes with his shoulder until it catches on the rug, then sidles in and slides it closed behind him. The room is cold. He shudders: suddenly, violently. From the closet he grabs a comforter and carries it over onto the little bed, crawls deeply under the covers. Settling his cheek onto the cool slip of his wife's panties, he pulls the phone in next to his ear and dials.

He knows the number by feel. He has done this before, in the dark, in the middle of the night. Slowly, carefully, his fingers work their way along the buttons, pausing once or twice to redirect their course. He closes his eyes, draws the yeasty-salty scent of his wife deep into his lungs. Waits for Kiera to pick up the phone.

"Hello?" Her voice is hoarse and faraway. *"Hello?"*

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His lips press up against the phone. For a moment he does not speak.

"Tell me what you're wearing," he whispers.

"Mmmmmh...Josef." Just a moan, sleep-thick and swollen. He waits for her to go on, pulls his legs up close to his chest and folds his penis into his right hand.

"What time is it?" she yawns. It's nearly a complaint but not quite. He strokes himself, slowly, feels the sudden lurch and straining of his cock against his hand.

"You're just wearing panties, aren't you?"

"Mmm-hm." There's a purring in her voice now, next to the sleep. He groans. His fingers contract, ride roughly up over the tip of his penis and squeeze hard until it drips onto his hand.

"Mmm, that's what I thought. I couldn't sleep...I needed to hear your voice."

His eyes are closed, his hand lies flat against his belly, sliding the wet up and down against his skin.

"Just talk to me...tell me something, tell me anything, anything at all..."

"I was just dreaming, Josef. It was a good dream..." Her voice is soft, and thick with sleep.

"Tell me about the dream, babe...I want to hear about the dream."

"I can't remember."

"Where are your hands?"

He hears her sigh, he hears the stretching of her body in her voice.

"I'm holding myself, Josef."

He moans, suddenly, heavily, draws his penis back into his fist and pushes through and back again.

"Oh, baby..."

"I'm touching myself."

"Ohhh..." He groans, feels himself falling, sliding, disappearing deeply now into the dark. His spine has gone rigid; his left hand shakes and clenches at the phone beside his head.

"I'm pretending it's you, Josef..."

It is dark now, he has lost himself inside the blackness. His eyes are closed, his right hand works itself against the throbbing of his blood. He gasps for air, breathes in the briny fullness of his wife's dark scent. Abruptly he lets out the thin tip of a cry, holds it in his throat for as long as he is able, and then the darkness crashes and explodes around him. His body lurches; the phone falls from his left hand off the far side of the bed.

"Ohhh baby...ohhh Claudia. Sweet, sweet baby."

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Blue Notebook December 21, 1999

I am not yet old, but I have felt it for a very long time: the harsh wisdom of pain settling into my joints like a fine, cool grit. It's in my eyes, too, grinding away at tender flesh, so when I open them these days I often squint, preferring the safety of a smaller slice of heaven and earth. Anyhow the world is big enough already: the sky too blue, the sun too sharp. Even when I stay inside, my face pressed hard into my pillow, even when I keep the blinds pulled tight down to the sills. I do believe there is plenty of time, though I do not yet know whether that is a blessing or a curse. I am sure that in the end there will be many surprises. And I have learned enough to wait.

There were no saints in our story. There never are, once you live long enough to see things backwards. We all had our moments, some of us longer than others, but even the best of us slipped behind our other selves like shadows at noon, hardly even there anymore. There were times I'd find him, staring hard into the mirror, studying the planes and angles of his face as though looking for something that was no longer there. I knew what he was doing. I did it too, late at night, when the minutes marched along on clicking heels. It was then I would wander the house like a spirit, half in and half out of this world, winding my way back to that mirror in the hallway. Staring deep into the eyes of the stranger whose life I had once owned.

Josef came to me as an angel, not a saint. There is a difference, you know: It is easier to be an angel. It is enough to be someone else's answer. To be a saint you must answer also to yourself. Josef was my answer. He showed up when all my loose ends were hanging off of me like fringes on a scarf, catching themselves up on every breeze that blew this way and that. There were things I needed and things I was looking for, but they were never the same and I could not have said what either of them was after all. But that is how he found me, curled tight into myself, and one half of me rose to greet him.

We slept together, that first night, as the rain battered the metal awning beneath his bedroom window. For the life of me I cannot remember it, I wish I did. I have never told that to anyone. He told me once he could not take his eyes off of me, that night – the color of my skin. He remembered what I wore. He remembered that my bangs kept falling in my eyes each time he tried to kiss me. He remembered which side of which album we heard as he pored over my body, and the soft noises I made when he entered me for the first time. He remembered the taste of my mouth, and the smell of my skin. All of these things he might have made up, but I know he did not. He has told me his story so many times that over the years it has become my own, the way a picture looked at a thousand times becomes the memory itself.

I do know we were happy, Josef and I, I can say that there was love. I know that we laughed – that is what I have come to miss the most. Perhaps I married him for that. He was the one way I knew to be happy: to feel my eyes crinkle up, the skin pulling tight and wide across my cheekbones. Sometimes I would snort with it, all that happiness, the breaths

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ragged and hard, a thin line of tears hammocked snugly in my lower lids. But happiness will grow in many gardens, like rank weeds in good soil. We lived that way for many years, Josef and I, weathering the small storms, craning our necks this way and that to feel the sun on our faces. Those years, let me tell you about them. We went to work. We ate dinners. We bought a house. We had a baby. And the stalks and the leaves of our happy life grew taller and wider, claiming larger and larger pieces of earth. I watched it with my own two eyes: watched it crowd out the tiny seedlings that tried to grow in its shadow, and I swelled with the pride and promise of it, that hardy life of ours, waiting patiently for something to burst forth high above.

But a weed is a weed. I should have known that. It grows at the expense of all around it, and it does not give anything for all it takes away. When the time came, of course, there was no glorious display, no flower at the top, nothing to warm our hands or hearts around when the weather turned against us. If there were blossoms there, they were so tiny and so transient that I never saw them at all, only the long, slender seedpods that stood in their place, staring back at me like wicked smiles. And when, finally, I pulled at all that useless foliage, I realized what I might have guessed at all along: that that rangy life had shallow roots, thin as thread: the kind that slide up easily out of the earth with the tug of an indifferent hand.

But then every marriage is a trade-off, is it not? A slippery bargain. Something we hold tight in our hands while our eyes and our hearts wander freely, up and down the block. It is not easy to admit, least of all to ourselves, but there are many people in every marriage, and only two of them curl together at night, flesh to flesh, one arm looped protectively around one soft belly. All the rest go on about their business, late into the night, hatching their imprudent schemes, hoping and dreaming that the world is a much wider place than they know it to be.