

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

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The Widow Across the Way

Sylvia, the 82-year old widow across the hall wants my girlfriend, I mean wants her. But maybe I'm wrong. She's lonely. Her husband's been dead for 12 years. She drinks. But, still, she leaves the door to her apartment propped open, telling Lily she does it when she's taking a bath, for Lily, just in case.... And she's constantly telling Lily how beautiful she is, grabbing her, and trying to kiss her on the lips. Lily deflects the lips with a quick turn of the cheek, and later comes back to tell me "God, she really grosses me out sometimes." And she tells me how Sylvia said if something happens then Lily can come home and tell me "It wasn't that bad at all."

In the morning I kiss Lily goodbye and she puts her finger to her lips to shoosh me as I creep out of the apartment, giving her a quick wave, and closing the door carefully, slowly, behind me. Sylvia's door is cracked open. I ease open the outside door and close it until it locks with a click. Before I'm two steps away from the door I hear a distinct rat-tat-tat behind me. Like machine gun fire, but it's not. It's her -- Sylvia -- who was waiting for me to leave. I envision her standing there, hiding behind the door, like a lioness waiting for its prey to enter the field from the brush. I stand still and hear it again: "Rat-tat-tat." And in my mind's eye I see Lily standing behind the door, her hand on her cheek, holding her breath, trying not to make a sound. Waiting for Sylvia to go away.

When I get to work Lily calls me: "You're not going to believe what she did this time." Then she proceeds to tell me. "She was vacuuming the hallway in her underwear – bra and panties – saying 'Don't I look sexy? Isn't my bra pretty? Do you want to touch it? And afterwards talking about how she was going to take a bath and her pussy would be nice and clean.'"

"She said that?"

"What?"

I look around me at work. I can't really say it here in the corporate cubicle world.

I whisper: "You know. The p word."

"Oh, yeah. She definitely said it. And she asked me if I wanted to come in and scrub her back."

"She didn't."

"She did."

"God."

"We've got to do something about this, Jack. This is how my day goes. It's crazy. Right after you left she knocked on the door, like she was waiting for you to leave."

"I know, I know, I heard her."

"You heard her?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

"I heard her knocking, I mean. Just after I got outside."

"And when I didn't answer, she walked around to the kitchen window and knocked on it, yelling my name. I tell you I feel like a prisoner in this apartment. I'm afraid to even play the stereo because she might hear it and knock. And at four o'clock I just know she's going to want to have a cigarette in the hall and cocktail hour."

"She's bored, she's alone. She has nothing to do. And you do."

"Yes, that's the point — I do. I've got deadlines to meet and an 82-year old neighbor who wants me to watch soap operas with her and wash her back and whatever else she has in mind. I mean I feel sorry for her because she's all alone, and I like her, I love her, don't get me wrong, but she's driving me crazzzzzzzzzzy."

"We have to do something," I say.

"Yes, we do." Lily sighs on the other end of the line.

"Well, you better get back to work. We'll figure something out."

"Yes, we have to," I say.

This much we're agreed on. We have to do something before we both go crazy.

We're both just settling into this happy life together after serving long sentences in our prior marriages. Somehow we found each other. It seems like a miracle to each of us, to find happiness after so much misery before. And we selfishly hoard our time alone together now.

So the question is Sylvia. What are we going to do about Sylvia?



It's Friday night and the three of us are sitting in the hallway as has become our ritual. "Having a little party," Sylvia calls it. I'm on my folding chair between Lily and Sylvia as they sit in their white plastic patio chairs in front of the square modular plastic table with the ashtray on it. We're sitting next to the door and occasionally Lily will prop the door open a little even though it's 12 degrees outside because I don't smoke and she doesn't want me to be breathing in all these fumes. They're both smoking, a drink in each of their hands. Sylvia has her Bloody Mary, Lily her scotch on the rocks. I'm drinking an ale out of the bottle, listening to them talk for the most part. Occasionally they'll bring me into the conversation. One time Lily gives me a great big smile, turns to Sylvia and says "Isn't he great?" Sylvia smiles at me with that narrow skeletal face of hers, leans over and rubs my arm. "Oh, yes, and soooo good looking. Maybe when you're out of commission you can lend him to me."

Lily laughs and I smile, pretending this kind of talk doesn't bother me, doesn't bother Lily. Did she really say what I think she said? Out of commission?

"Or maybe," she says, "if you leave your door open, I can sneak in the middle of the night for a threesome."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Lily and I look at each other again, searching in each other's eyes. Did this 82-year old woman really say this just now? Does she have no limits? My God, she's eighty two years old! Together, we look back at Sylvia. She's smiling.

I take a swallow of ale and laugh, gazing at Lily. "I think we're going to keep the door locked tonight, Hon, what do you think?"

"Oh, that doesn't matter, because I have the key."

It's true. She does. She has the keys since the apartment manager doesn't live on premises and Sylvia's been here for 45 years.

"Well, uh, we'll have the latch on, right, Hon?" I'm looking at Lily for help.

She smiles at me and winks, pats my knee.

She needs a man. A Cassanovic octogenarian.

Thursdays Sylvia plays cards at her club so Lily gets to breathe some, at least for a while. Sylvia's "club" is a country club she and her husband used to play golf at and to which she now went every Thursday morning to play euchre with her lady friends. They play for nickels, dimes, and quarters. It's Sylvia's only day out, except for the weekends when she drives up to the suburbs to take care of her 96-year old friend, Doris, for the weekend.

Doris is in a wheel chair, has a hard time getting around, but still hung on fiercely to her independence.

On Saturdays Sylvia goes shopping for Doris, prepares her meals for the week – dishing them into carefully labeled Tupperware containers and placing them in the freezer, and clean up, do laundry, and whatever else is needed to be done.

"If it weren't for Sylvia, I don't know what I'd do.' That's what she tells people, and it's true."

"Why don't you move in with her?" Lily asks, "instead of doing all that?"

Sylvia takes a drag on her cigarette, the orange tip glowing in the darkness, and exhales into the gathering cloud of smoky fog that was beginning to fill the narrow hallway. Then she scowls and stares at Lily.

"There's no way in hell I could actually live with that woman. She can be as mean as all get up if you give her half a chance. Last week she told me that I was just spoiled by my husband, spoiled, that I never had to do a thing. Imagine that. I may not have had to work outside the home but I worked – I took care of him, had his meals on the table the moment he got home, ironed his shirts, his underwear, kept the place clean, did laundry. It wasn't like I never lifted a finger! Talk about gratitude! After all I do for her. And this is someone who's supposed to be my friend?"

There are tears gleaming in Sylvia's eyes now. I sit there still, as Lily gets up quickly, walks around my chair and puts her arms around Sylvia from behind, saying, "Oh, Sylvia, she didn't mean anything! She's probably just frustrated with her situation, afraid that she's losing her indepen-

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

dence. I'm sure she didn't mean a thing. She didn't mean it to come out the way it did."

Sylvia snuffles a little and wipes her eyes with a tissue, then turns her face toward Lily, puts her hands on the sides of Lily's head and says, "You are the dearest, sweetest girl. I don't know what I would do without you." Then she purses her lips and tries to pull her lips towards her, which Lily avoids by a quick turn of the head so that all that Sylvia gets is a sharp smack on Lily's right cheek.

And now Lily's staring at me with a befuddled look on her face.

"Hon," she says, "would you mind..." and I read her mind, reach for her glass, just as she says "...getting me another drink. please."

"Do you think she's serious?" Lily asks me later as we're sitting on the couch staring at the television.

"Serious?" I ask.

"You know what I mean. The way she always seems to be...you know... hitting on me."

I scratch my beard. "I don't know," I say. It honestly baffles me, this whole Sylvia situation.

"Well she's creeping me out. Did I tell you that she grabbed my butt when I was walking out of her apartment this afternoon?"

"Grabbed it?"

"Yes, I mean tight. A couple good squeezes and she wouldn't let go."

"And what did you do?"

"I didn't know what to do. She caught me off guard. I laughed it off, pretended it was nothing."

"God, who knew we'd be living across the hall from an oversexed eighty year old. Maybe we should look on one of those online dating services for a friend for her."

"How many 80-year old guys are on the Internet?"

"Well...you have a good point, but it's probably worth a try, isn't it?"

To our surprise, Lily finds a couple of guys on an online dating service. One's named Chuck. He's seventy-eight, weighs three hundred pounds, has a liver-spotted cue-ball of a head and is looking for women from the age range of – could it be? – 40 to 60 years old.

I'm looking over her shoulder as she types. "That's got to be a mistake."

"Nooooo, I don't think so," Lily says. "God, some men are bastards no matter how old they get."

"They're just older bastards."

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

"Exactly."

She clicks on a second man's profile. His name is Edgar. He's 78, smiling, has little fringes of white hair over his ears and is wearing a bow tie.

"He's cute," Lily says, and turns half around in her chair to face me. "What do you think?"

"He doesn't do all that much for me, but then again, I am a guy."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot that," she says, smiling wide.

"Smart ass," I say.

"He likes to golf and play cards. Just like Sylvia! And have the occasional cocktail."

"God, we've heard enough of Sylvia's cock tales to last us a lifetime."

"You haven't heard half of them."

"Really?"

"She's always trying to get info on our sex life. Like hinting around, asking me if we like this, if we do that."

"And what do you say?"

"I don't say anything. Just that everyone has their own preferences, you know?"

"Yeah."

"Like Sylvia doesn't like giving oral sex, thinks it's disgusting. Only she calls it oil sex."

"Oil."

"Yeah. She has trouble with the r's. So what do you think of Edgar?"

"His ears are a little big, but hell what can you do."

"Their ears are all big at that age."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's a well known fact. The cartilage of the ear continues to grow as you get older."

"I'll take you word for it."

"So what should we do? Answer her ad like we're Sylvia? Or just send him a note saying we have some one he might like to meet? She doesn't really want to meet anyone she says."

"That's what she says. But maybe if the right guy came along...."

"That's what I think."

"If the right guy came along she might not be trying to grab my honey's ass every time she walks by."

We answer the guy's ad, tell him the scoop, figure if he likes we'll invite him to dinner, tell Sylvia he's a friend of the family (one of our's family – the details we have to work out yet). And in a couple of days he

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

answers us, sends an email saying he'd be delighted to meet our "little lady."

"Well, she might be little. I don't know about the lady part," I say.

"Jack. Be nice."

"I mean...oil sex."

So, we set things up. Lily gets his phone number and tells him Friday would be good. "He sounds cute, nice. He's got the nicest laugh," she says. Then we invite Sylvia over for dinner. We don't tell her about Edgar, though. Figure she might not like it if we did that, but once she was there what was she going to do, leave?



The big night comes.

Sylvia knocks on the door at six forty-five. She's standing there with a bottle of wine and a big smile, her arms outstretched to hug Lily. Lily accepts her arms for an instant and pats Sylvia on the back, then takes her wine into the kitchen and tells her to make herself at home.

"It was so nice of the two of you to invite me over like this," she says, sitting on the couch and crossing her legs. "We're just like one big happy family, aren't we?"

Lily frowns at me from the kitchen. She's holding the bottle and motioning for me to come in. "I can't get this bottle, Jack. Can you do it for me?"

I walk into the kitchen, take the bottle as Lily walks behind me and closes the kitchen door behind us.

"I can't do this," she says. "I feel like I'm betraying her."

I work at the bottle with the wine opener on my pocket knife, snaking the endlessly looping piece of metal into the cork.

"What do you mean? She needs someone. We've talked about this," I say, trying to remain calm, one hand on the neck of the bottle as I start to yank my pocket knife and the cork straight up, inching it out until it comes free with a little popping sound.

"You don't understand. She told me she doesn't want to be with anyone, that she had a good man and he's gone now, that she can live with his memory."

"His memory and lunging for you and making lewd comments to both of us every chance she gets."

She puts her hand on my shoulder, as I pour her a glass of Chablis.

"Wine?" I ask, offering the glass to her.

"Sure," she says. "Why not?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Five minutes later I'm sitting in a chair opposite Sylvia, who's sitting on the couch with her glass of wine. Sylvia's asking me about my job, general chit-chat type stuff, when there's a knock at the door.

"Oh my," Sylvia says. "You two weren't expecting someone, were you?"

"Not that I know of," I say, as Lily rounds the corner and answers the door. I get only a glimpse of the man – Edgar – with his bow-tie and his large bunch of flowers – before Lily closes the door behind her.

I glance at Sylvia. She's sipping her drink, looking at me with a worried expression. "Jack," she says.

"Hmmm?" I say, sipping my beer.

"You might want to go out there and help Lily, Jack. Maybe she's in some kind of trouble."

I smile and let out a quick burst of nervous laughter, then clear my throat and get up. "Maybe you're right, Sylvia. Maybe I should see what's going on out there."

I get up off the couch and head to the door, open and shut it behind me. Lily is telling the man, "No, no, the flowers were not a good idea. I told you, you were just supposed to be a friend of my mother's who was stopping by unannounced. The flowers are a dead giveaway that's not true."

The man's eyes are two large sad eggs. "But they're so beautiful," he says. He looks over at me for help. "Aren't they?"

"Oh, yes, yes, they really are."

Lily shoots me a look and rolls her eyes. I'm obviously being of no help in this situation.

"Look, Edgar, we really appreciate the gesture, but if you want to do this, we're going to have to nix the flowers or say you brought them for me. Okay?"

"Sure. Okay," he says in one breath, then, rubbing his hands together says, "So, where's the hot babe?" Lily and I look at each other.

Lily introduces Edgar to Sylvia, telling him of the fictitious relationship and circumstances that brought him here. Sylvia takes an immediate shine to him.

"I don't mean to be interrupting you here," he even says, having regained the spin of his role fairly quickly.

"Oh, no, no bother at all," Sylvia says.

And Lily jumps in: "You know, Edgar, have you had dinner yet? Why don't you stay for dinner. We have more than enough."

"Yes, that's a wonderful idea," Sylvia says, putting her hand on Edgar's shoulder. "Why don't you?"

Edgar's face turns red like he's just had quick flash of too much sun.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

"Well, if you really want me to."

Lily and Sylvia join in, "Sure, yeah."

Lily looks at me. "Yes, yeah, we'd love to have you stay, Edgar. Please. We insist."

He smiles and sits on the couch.

"Let me get you something to drink," I volunteer. "Some wine, a beer?"

Half an hour later we're at the table. Sylvia's put away three or four glasses of wine and it's clear she's feeling fine. She's talking only to Edgar. I drop my fork and catch a glimpse of her bare foot inching its way up Edgar's leg. I sit back up and see him turning red again, sitting upright in a stiff posture.

After dinner the two of them are sitting back on the couch. Sylvia's inches from Edgar's face, her wine glass in one hand, her other hand playing with Edgar's yellow and black polka-dotted tie.

I'm helping Lily wash the dishes. She washes and hands each dish for me to dry.

"This is great, Hon, isn't it? Our plan seems to be working."

"Shhhh, not too loud," she says

"How many beers have you had? They'll hear you?"

"The way it looks, I don't think they're hearing anything right now, but the beating of their own hearts. Look at them," I say, "pausing with my wiping."

Lily pauses, too. "They look so cute together, don't they?" she asks.

"Yes, sweetie, they do. They were made for each other."

"No," she says, "that would be me and you." She reaches up and gives me a quick peck on the cheek.

Then she laughs. "God," she says, "you and Edgar are a pair."

"What do you mean?"

"You're blushing!"

Two hours later, Sylvia's leading Edgar by hand across the hall for "a night cap," she says, and Edgar's not fighting. He's got a great big smile across his face.

After they leave, Lily falls against me, leaning her head against my chest. I hold her loosely, rubbing her back. "This was something, wasn't it? Really something."

"You're really something," she says, smiling up at me, giving me that look, then leading me, without a word, by the hand, into the bedroom.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1



Sylvia is crying. She's been crying all day, Lily tells me.

"He tried to kiss me, and I couldn't...I just couldn't...I looked at Don's picture and I just knew I could never kiss him. I could never kiss anyone but Don." She's sobbing and Lily has her arm around Lily, patting her back.

"I know, I know," she says.

I'm sitting in my usual spot, beer between my legs, watching the scene, swigging from the bottle once in a while.

"He was my one true love. No one could ever take his place. Why did I try to fool myself? And Edgar seems like such a nice man. I feel bad about it. He asked for my phone number but I didn't give it to him. I said we could be friends but that was all. I'm a one woman man. And what does a one woman man do when her man's been gone for ten years? Live on the memories?" She turned her head toward Lily, her eyes red, a lost look on her face. "Tell me, Lily, what does a woman do?"



Lily is sitting in the hallway with Sylvia as I pack the last of the boxes up in the truck. We've found a house of our own. It's what we need. A place of our own.

Sylvia is crying and Lily's patting her back. I pull the back door down on the van and slide the ramp back into place, then head back into the building where the two of them are sitting.

"Well," I say, "looks like we're all set to go."

Sylvia stands up.

"Are you sure you couldn't use a tenant? I don't cost a lot to feed and I can cook a thing or two." There's a pleading look in her eyes.

I don't answer.

"Oh, I don't know why you two have to leave. You're the best neighbors I've had in forty-two years." Then she glares at me. "Why do you have to take her away from me?"

I'm stunned. But then she breaks down again, holds her arms out, says "Come her," and hugs Lily in one arm and me in the other. "I love you guys," she says, weeping. Then Lily's crying and I'm crying, we're all crying. We stand there for about five minutes, then I break loose, stick my hands in my pockets looking at the two of them.

Lily breaks away, too.

"We'll have you over for dinner," she says. "We'll come visit often. It's not like we're going to the moon."

Sylvia looks like she's about to fall over.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

“I’ll be fine,” she says and works her mouth into a smile.

Then Lily pats Sylvia on the back and follows me out the door. I help her into the passenger side of the truck, then jump in on the other side and start up the engine. We begin inching away from the building. I take a look in the side mirror. Sylvia’s standing there, hands by her sides, as I continue out of the parking lot onto the street. She’s getting smaller and smaller until she’s out of sight, she vanishes completely.

Mitchell Waldman’s fiction and poetry has appeared in or will appear shortly in a number of publications, including *Wind Magazine*, *The Moronic Ox Literary and Cultural Journal*, *The HazMat Literary Review*, *The Battered Suitcase*, *Éclectic Flash*, *Innisfree*, *Poetpourri*, *The Advocate*, *Mobius*, *The Parnassus Literary Review*, *Desperate Act*, and *Poetry Motel*, and in the anthology, **BEYOND LAMENT: POETS OF THE WORLD BEARING WITNESS TO THE HOLOCAUST.**