

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/3

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The Invisible Wife

Living in the attic of her ex-husband's home these past two months had been exhausting. Darlene had to be so careful not to be detected, not to leave the slightest clue, and she'd gotten really good at covering her tracks. With the evening festivities approaching, Darlene felt her spirits rise.

Through the thin slatted dormer window she saw a pink streaked sky with a half disc of a setting sun on the horizon. Light in the attic dimmed, but she didn't dare turn on the battery-powered lantern, fearing a beam of light could slip through the tiny openings between the splintery floor boards. Looking into a sliver of mirror hanging from a post. Darlene applied lipstick and fluffed her long, dark hair. She slipped on a red, silk dress. After all, she had to look good for the celebration. Justin and his wife, Lila, were having a dinner party for their first wedding anniversary.

If everything went according to plan, this would be the first and last anniversary of Justin's marriage to Lila. Nothing would stop Darlene from getting her husband back where he belonged – in her arms. He never really left her, only went temporarily insane. All would be forgiven. After all, many men go through a mid-life crisis, thinking a younger wife will make them happy. Justin was no exception. In time, most men realize their colossal mistake and wish they'd stayed with the first wife who really loved them for themselves and not for their wallet like Lila. Darlene had made it her mission to make Justin aware of Lila's real persona.

The doorbell downstairs rang several times and Darlene heard footsteps below in the foyer. The sun had gone down and now Darlene depended on the fragments of light seeping up from the dining room downstairs to illuminate her quarters. She located the bottle of wine and a stemmed glass. It was cocktail hour and she wanted to join in the party. She poured a glass of wine and finished it quickly.

By eight o'clock everyone had entered the dining room, and Darlene could view a portion of the large oak table through a small peephole she'd cut in the ceiling beside the crystal chandelier. The only other see-through she'd risked drilling in the ranch house attic floor was directly over the bed in the master bedroom, a tactic she considered ingenious. She only had to see what they ate, how they made love and the conversations around those activities to know what their life was like. It was the barometer that determined the degree of joy or misery in people's lives. Darlene knew that once she investigated and evaluated their lifestyle, the outcome would prove that Justin and Lila were miserable.

On all fours, Darlene peered through the hole and viewed the guests. She recalled how easily she'd moved into the attic. As an architect, she had designed the house. Before their divorce, Darlene had planned to convert the attic into an office. She'd built a ladder to the upper level of the garage and installed a door abutting the dormer. Foolishly, Justin had not changed the lock on the garage door nor reprogrammed the code that opened the overhead door although the house locks had been changed. Darlene smiled and poured another glass of wine. The man never did have a good sense of engineering, and could never figure out how the

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house was structured. Maybe he underestimated her brazenness that she could possibly move back into the house because she'd been such a pliant wife.

She felt safe, knowing Justin's allergies kept him out of dusty attics, and Lila was too much the princess to dirty herself. On weekends when the lovebirds were home from work, Darlene left the mildewed space by way of the garage, climbing down the stairs to the concrete floor. She stayed at a cheap motel a mile away in a room hardly better than the attic that contained a small table, a chair and a sleeping bag. The motel room did have a narrow bed. That was all she needed until the day of victory when Justin came back to her.

During the work week, Darlene stayed overnight, sometimes using a bucket when urgency overtook her. She kept her intake of liquids to a minimum, although tonight was different. It was a celebration. Darlene poured a bit more wine into her glass.

Most weekday mornings the lovebirds left for work by seven-thirty and that was her signal to use the downstairs facilities – shower, toilet even helping herself to some foods like cereal, an occasional egg or can of soup and a slice of bread. She was careful not to use too much food to avoid arousing suspicion.

She heard the tinkle of forks on plates and the beautiful ping of crystal wine glasses. Darlene placed the electronic listening device she'd purchased from a detective catalogue on the floor and turned up the volume.

"These emerald earrings are to die for, Lila. What a great anniversary present," a woman next to Lila said, fingering the earrings delicately. The word die came out in a long, breathy sigh.

Those earrings should be mine. Darlene hated everyone seated at the table. They'd been her friends when she was married to Justin, the same people who promptly deserted her after the divorce. They kept Justin and welcomed Lila because Justin had all the money and gave lavish parties. They had made her feel invisible when they banned her from anything resembling her previous life, and then the idea came to her.

She had decided to do cosmetic procedures with the money she'd gotten in the divorce settlement. With a picture of Lila in hand, she'd directed the surgeon to duplicate the high cheek bones and slightly pointed chin as much as possible. Although that money was all she had in the world, she knew it would pay off when she recaptured Justin's love. She laughingly called it her investment for the future.

Justin looked handsome in his tuxedo despite a receding hairline. Lila wore a low-cut green strapless dress that tightly banded her breasts, causing abundant flesh to overflow its silk cage. Earlier in the day, Darlene had tried on that same dress while rummaging in Lila's closet which she often did. She'd been pleasantly surprised at the cleavage she'd added because of her surgically enhanced breasts and the way the silk fell over her slim, lipo-suctioned hips. Her resemblance to Lila was striking although not one hundred percent. It would do. Darlene was committed to beating Lila, who had snagged Justin with her body and sexual allure, at her own game. The two women were the same height and Darlene's body matched Lila's any day.

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Inhaling the aroma of rib roast as the maid passed the platter around Darlene's mouth watered. It had been a long time since she'd had a home-cooked meal, maybe not since her divorce. How she'd love to cook for Justin – lasagna, pistachio encrusted salmon, lamb chops – the list was endless as she dreamed up new and better recipes. Now But she'd grown weary of a hideout diet of beef jerky, dried fruit and rationed liquids.

Before sneaking into the attic, Darlene had tortured herself with wanting to know how the lovebirds lived; how they made love, what they ate, which side of the bed Justin slept on, and did they have simultaneous orgasms? Did Jason break wind in front of her or wash his pecker after sex like he had with Darlene? Being able to observe them didn't totally satisfy her, but knowing she had the power to alter their lives did.

The chatter downstairs about who bought a new car, took a European trip or found a new maid bored Darlene. She felt dizzy from the wine, leaned against a pillar and drifted off to sleep. She awoke to silence and looked through the hole. The table was cleared and no sounds could be heard. She checked the time. Four AM. She had missed most of the celebration. Not a disaster.

Darlene moved to the second peep hole over the bedroom. The couple had fallen asleep – probably too tired to make love. Tomorrow was Saturday and they'd be home from work. Scrambling out through the garage she headed into the woods surrounding the house for the one mile trek back to the motel.

As she made her way along the rough path strewn with twigs and rocks, Darlene agonized about how Justin had left her. Together they'd owned a real estate company and hired Lila as their bookkeeper. When the profits plummeted shortly thereafter, Darlene wanted to fire Lila. Justin denied it had anything to do with the new employee. Not long after that he left with the bookkeeper and probably most of the profits. She didn't blame Justin. Lila made him do it.

But now she could taste triumph like the sweetness of wedding cake. Her plan required diligence, no less than what they'd stressed at the mental health clinic. Focus on a goal, they'd told her. And indeed she had although it had taken a toll. Sleepless nights had stamped dark circles under her eyes. But soon she'd be back with Justin and restored.

The weekend passed slowly while Darlene thumbed through architectural magazines, keeping up on the latest trends. She did miss her work. On Monday morning she returned at seven-forty-five AM, making sure there were no cars in the driveway. Once in the attic, Darlene slung a canvass bag over her shoulder, opened a trap door on the floor, and lowered a rope ladder to reach the downstairs hallway. After showering, she wiped away the moisture on the tile, checked for stray black hairs, flushed the toilet for the third time and stuffed her wet towel in her duffel bag. In the kitchen she poured cereal in a bowl, poured milk and ate greedily.

Then she applied makeup, perfume and, what she liked to call Lila's floozy violet lipstick. Walking into Justin's bedroom she lifted Justin's white shirt off the valet and moved the material close to her face, inhaling his scent. Her heart nose-dived, but she quickly got control of herself.

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After pressing her lips on the collar, she rubbed his beige sports jacket against her cheek, wiping her perfumed skin on the material. She bundled the clothing, dropped it on the closet floor just under Lila's robe and hurried up the ladder to her sanctuary.

At six o'clock, Darlene heard the door open and the giggling and shuffling. It was their ritual kissing session as a prelude to sex. It was the only time Lila was quiet and not jabbering. Darlene puckered her mouth, imitating a disgusting kiss like a teenager, and then slithered on the floor until she was over the bedroom. She peered into the peephole. A light went on and she saw Jason tug his clothes off and then undress Lila. Justin had gone a little soft around the middle but still retained much of his former muscled body. Darlene sighed.

"I love eating dinner at home," Lila said, jumping on the bed.

Darlene found her remark corny and stupid. She turned up the listening device.

"You taste great. Oh, touch me there," Justin said. "Pinch hard. Squeeze. Move your head."

Darlene couldn't help noting that Lila's voluptuous body undulated like a landscape of smooth hills and canyons, and her blonde hair fanned across the pillow.

Contorted bodies lunged, arms flailed and heads appeared between crotches. Justin, on top now, hit his head against the headboard with each thrust. Darlene thought he might become brain damaged and wondered how they made movie love scenes look so sexy. She recalled Justin as a sweet and tender lover, not anything resembling this frantic circus taking place below.

"I'm coming." Justin's raspy voice sounded like an engine in need of oiling. "I love you, Lila," he bellowed, but Darlene heard it as, "I love you, Darlene."

"I love my daddy," Lila screeched, sounding like a yapping little poodle. After a while, Justin eased out of bed and into the bathroom. Lila put her robe on and made a disgusted noise as she picked up the dropped clothing. She made a move toward the clothes hamper, when she stopped suddenly. Putting the material close to her nose she sniffed. Then she examined every inch of the cotton shirt.

Tapping her foot, she stretched the shirt between her hands and waited. Justin stepped into the bedroom, wearing a terry robe. He held his arms out to Lila. She threw the shirt in his face.

"How dare you, you bastard."

Jason stood dumfounded. "What are you talking about?"

"You said you had a zoning board meeting on Thursday. Is this the kind of meeting you went to? I knew not to trust you, you lying dork." Lila picked up the shirt and shoved it into his face.

Darlene could see the impression of the purple against the white collar. Then Lila stuck the beige jacket in his face. "This thing has long, black hairs all over the shoulders, and I wasn't near you when you wore that jacket."

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"There is no way I had anything to do with another woman. I love you, only you." He said frantically. "The guys went out for a beer afterward. Maybe The waitress brushed against me."

"She'd have to be on top of you – and I mean on top."

"Darling, please believe me..."

Lila dressed hurriedly, rushed out and slammed the front door. Darlene heard the car tires skid out of the driveway. Lila had fallen for the oldest trick in the book. That's what happens to husband-snatchers. They never trust the guy they stole.

This was Darlene's moment.

She heard Justin rummaging around at the bar in the living, clanging glasses and bottles, picturing him downing in his preferred single malt scotch. When he was upset he could finish nearly the whole bottle. She heard him pacing. Darlene smiled, her time had come. Just be a bit more patient.

Half an hour later, Jason came staggering into the bedroom, his glass of scotch tipped, dripping liquid on the carpet. Jason put the glass on the night table, fell into bed and shut the light. My cue, thought Darlene.

Undressing, Darlene looked down at herself pleased that her body imitated Lila's so well. But something felt wrong. She knew that Jason would want her back with Lila's contours, but, for the first time, Darlene worried about her ability to keep up the charade once she and Justin were reconciled. Still, the prize was indeed worth it.

Quietly, she climbed down the rope ladder and walked into the pitch black bedroom. She closed the door and heard Justin's drunken, labored breathing. She didn't need light to walk the ingrained path to the bed. Reaching out to touch his cheek, she climbed in beside her love.

"You came back, Lila. You do believe me." Justin slurred his words. "I swear..."

"Shhh." Darlene wrapped her arms around him.

His tears ran down her shoulders as he pressed his head into the curve of her neck. That took Darlene aback. Justin had never cried for her that way. He'd happily shaken her hand after they signed the divorce papers.

Still, she'd planned this so carefully, she couldn't falter. Placing his hands on her Lila-like breasts, she felt odd, not genuine. As his hands fumbled on her skin, she felt the gulf between them widen. His palms, finger tips felt unfamiliar as though a stranger was touching her. She'd never felt more like a spectator in such an intimate situation. She tried assuring herself that they needed time. It had been two years since they were together. Results count and she'd won.

"Make love with me," she whispered, imitating Lila's voice. She'd practiced for a long time, although in his drunken state he probably couldn't tell the difference. Once they made love, she'd reveal her identity. He'd be so grateful to be saved by her.

"I love you and only you, Lila," Justin said, pressing his warm body against her. "I've never loved anyone but you."

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"Not even your ex-wife," she asked in a coy, Lila-like whisper.

"Not even my ex."

Darlene was startled but told herself he was trying to placate Lila. "You had to have loved Darlene a little. "You married her."

"It was a marriage of convenience. You know that, Lila. I did home rehabs and she was an architect," he said in a wobbly voice.

A crash imploded in Darlene's head. A glimmer of her foolishness crept in through the debris.

"Everything I do is for you," Justin went on. "I'm so drunk I can't keep my eyes open. Can we talk later?"

"Go to sleep, my darling," Darlene said, stroking his forehead. In two seconds, she heard him begin to snore lightly. She needed to think this through and decided to go back. Maybe she needed to find another route to win him back. Rising, Darlene picked up his ruined shirt from the floor and returned to the attic.

She rolled the shirt into her bag and dressed in jeans and a sweater, anxious to cover her nude fraudulent body as quickly as possible. Then she packed all of her belongings and rolled up her sleeping bag. Hoisting it all on her shoulders, she made her way out through the garage.

Lila's car skidded into the driveway spitting stones as Darlene stepped out on to the gravel. Darlene felt defeated. She hadn't won this round and maybe never would. A dull light shone from the side of the house.

Lila got out of the car and stared at Darlene. They were twenty feet apart. "Who are you? I'm going to call the police." She whipped out her cell and held a pepper spray wand in front of her.

Darlene's first instinct was to run, but she stayed still in her tracks. "Don't worry. I'm not going to hurt you."

It was dark with only the moon giving a dull sheen to skin. Darlene realized her appearance had changed drastically, and Lila didn't recognize her. Instead of announcing who she was Darlene saw an opportunity to walk away a victor. "I'm a friend," Darlene said. "A good friend of your husband."

"Get the hell out of here, bitch. You can't have him. He's mine. He loves only me, do you hear that? And I'll never leave him." Lila was screeching.

Darlene stood nonchalantly, but her insides curdled because Lila was right. Maybe she would have the last laugh after all. "You're living in a dream world." As was I, but now you can torture yourself with worrying who your husband might be screwing. Darlene turned slowly and deliberately before walking off.

Thrashing through the overhanging branches, she ignored the scratches to her hands and face. She looked back one last time, saw a light go on in their bedroom. Continuing her trek along the rough path, she thought about the insecurities Lila would suffer and might even take it out on Jason. He'll always be unsure if she'll stay or leave. Poetic justice, but, in the end, he loved Lila not herself. That was clear.

The time had come. She had to get back into architecture. Visions of houses crept into her thoughts and she became excited. In her imagina-

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tion, some houses had contemporary designs while others were traditional. No two were alike except that they all had lofts in the garages with ladders, leading up to a door that opened into a dormer.

You never know when they'll come in handy.