

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

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Buoyancy

I used to notice the absence of my ring. I would try to ignore it and start breakfast for my daughters and me. But when I flipped pancakes or got out the bacon, I would see the little light circle of skin of where my ring should be. I would pause from cooking and try to adorn the finger with another ring, but that always felt wrong. So I would decorate the fingers surrounding it with gaudy jewelry, finish cooking, and call my daughters down to breakfast.

That was right after Tom left. That was when I knew he would come back to his senses and return to me. Now I know enough to be glad that he left.

When I ate with my girls, Bliss and Victoria, I would lift my head up and look at us eating until I could imagine him chiding me. "Our daughters are looking more and more like you each day," he'd say. "Fat!" I didn't feel like eating when I thought about him saying those kinds of things, but everything I had cooked smelled so good, and the sounds of the smacking from Bliss and Vicki would bring my hand back to my fork. "Fucking obese," he'd say as if it was a term of endearment, as if it was expected of him.

Obese. I thought about that first cheap box of chocolates he bought me. Or that lobster, bright red and big, soaked in butter. At those times, the lack of adornment on my left hand was more of a comfort than an ache.

Unfortunately, Tom was right about my two daughters. Or our two daughters. Vicki, at twelve years old, was catching up with our sixteen-year-old Bliss in girth. Bliss could very well be like me—ninety-two pounds overweight. She was 165 pounds. I would tell them, "Watch your weight. Do you want to eat that?"

"Yeah," they would say. "If we don't, you will." My smart little girls. Really, though, they were quite beautiful in spite of their weight. In fact, Bliss wore her size well. She flaunted it and she never overdid it. Bliss had an abundance of friends and always had dates. She was a natural leader and, from what I could see, fun to be around. Sometimes, I was jealous of her.

I would see Tom while I was working. He should have gone somewhere else for his morning coffee and eggs and most of the time, he did. He only came in once or twice every week with some of his coworkers, the group of them welded together in A-shirts and ripped Dickies jeans, some brandishing mustaches and some with beards. They all smoked like bad guys do in the movies. They were always cussing and laughing, but none of them seemed happy.

Tom only came to the restaurant because he had to be with those guys; he had lost his license a long time ago and he needed the ride. Those guys liked coming there to Miser Diner because it had the best omelets and hash browns in the county. The potatoes were fried with onions, green,

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

yellow, and red peppers, and mushrooms. They came smothered in cheddar. I could eat plates of them.

When he came, he wouldn't look at me immediately, but he would watch me when I walked by taking orders or filling them. "Fat ass can't fit around the tables," he would say. His left eye only partly open, his right eyebrow raised high. I used to love that look and those eyes in general. When it was really short-handed, or packed at the diner, or on Sunday mornings when Tom had to work, I would have to wait his table. I couldn't get out of it if I tried. When I did wait on them, Tom'd ask me, "Will it make it to our table when you pick it up?" He and his friends would laugh. I'd feel like crying each time. He would say things like, "can't believe I married her" when I was near him.

I went home and cried on those days.

The problem was that I thought I still loved Tom. All my memories with him weren't bad; there were good reasons I married him and that I stayed with him for so many years. When he did work, he did provide for us. In spite of his behavior towards me now, he was a decent father to the girls and he loved them more than anything. And every once in a while, I'd see him alone when I'm grocery shopping or in town, and he'd talk to me. He'd ask me how I was doing. He asked if the girls and I were getting along alright. He would even smile like he used to, and everything would be okay. I still cared for him for those reasons. In a way— because of those things and because he was my children's father— I did love Tom.

My daughters became reluctant to visit Tom when his drinking got worse. During our separation, he picked them up and took them away for three days a week. It used to hurt to see the girls so happy to see him. He would wait in the car for them and beep his horn like crazy. I remember telling him on the phone once that it would not be so bad for him to come to the door and say hello, to show the girls that we were still friends. He had said that we were not friends. "Civil?" I asked.

"Nothing civil between us, Claudette. I don't want to see you and I don't want to talk to you."

I wouldn't let them go with him when he was too drunk and the girls would hate me all day for it. When Bliss turned eleven, he lost his license in his third drunken accident and Bliss and Vicki happily walked to see their father. Bliss learned more about her father's personality and drinking problem as she grew older, so she avoided her visits with him. She would only walk her sister to his house. Now, they visited him out of duty. "What did you ever see in him?" Bliss asked me.

My friend Becky asked that, too, but Becky knew why. She was there when we met. Near my side when we got married. When he left the first time. The second and third time. The final time. But she didn't see everything. Not even Bliss saw it all. It's easier to see a relationship's problems if you're not part of it, but it's easier to see what's working when you're in the midst of it.

"He got you like this," Becky used to tell me.

"Like what?" I would ask, knowing her answer.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

"Fat!" She would then tell me to lose weight. "He's not here anymore to mold you into a useless mass of a woman, so you can exercise, eat well." And I would do it for a while. For a week or two. Once for a whole month.

Becky doesn't say that anymore, though. She came by one day and watched Bliss and Vicki dance around to loud rap music. They only had on their jeans and bras. Their hair was down and mussed. They looked like they were really having a great time.

"You let them listen to this crap?" Becky asked. "'Bitch' this and 'whore' that?"

"They'll listen to it if I say do or don't. At least this way, I can hear what the rapper's saying and talk to them about it."

"And you can stand listening to it?"

I laughed. "No. But remember your parents when you listened to Anthrax?"

She smiled, sat down and dug into her canvas bag. We were in the kitchen of my yellow, linear, mobile home. Becky and I called it the submarine. Our joke was that one day, we'd hitch it up and move it to California like modern-day Joads.

Becky pulled out a plastic bag full of fruit from her canvas sack. She set the plastic bag on the kitchen table and ripped it open, reached in and brought out an apple. She handed it to me. Then another. She tries to make me eat healthy. She's only 125 pounds. I took the apples to the sink and rinsed them. Becky arranged the rest of the fruit in a bowl on the middle of the table for the girls and me to have later.

I finished washing the apples and gave Becky one. I sat down across from her. We bit into the fruit and watched Bliss show Vicki how to dance. New dances, I had supposed. They looked beautiful. I looked at Becky and I felt she saw it, too: The beautiful young girls that were smart enough not to be obsessed with weight, but were too carefree to worry about being overweight.

Becky had often told them to try to live forever. To eat better. They would reply with nods and smiles, eat healthy around her, but grab a bag of chips and a twenty ounce bottle of soda when Becky was gone.

They could move. Bliss looked good moving. "Keep it up, I have to take a shower," Bliss told Vicki.

"A shower this late?" Becky asked.

"Has a date," I said. "She's going out."

"I have to smoke. You want to go out on the porch?"

"Didn't you quit? Isn't smoking as bad as obesity?"

"I know. I quit. I started back. So do you want to smoke?"

"Sure," I answered.

We went out and tossed our apple cores on the lawn. We sat on the stoop of the trailer. I took out my pack of smokes and handed one to Becky.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

"Going out on a date," she said around her cigarette. She lit it and puffed out smoke. "Who's the lucky guy?"

"Who the hell knows?" I asked. "It's a different one every week. I won't let her go out every night when school's in. That happens in summer, and it will be two or three guys a week."

"Is that right? I wonder why I never knew about that." She took a long drag from her cigarette. She didn't look at me, just out on the lot. Nothing to see there, I thought, but other linear homes.

"You never asked," I told her. I looked out on the lot, too. I thought about planting a garden next summer.

"Yeah, but why?" She still wouldn't look at me and there wasn't much on that trailer court to see. She was avoiding me.

"Because she's heavy," I said.

Becky cleared her throat. "That is probably why. I don't want to admit it, but—"

"She's a really popular girl. If she's not going out with a guy, she's going with a bunch of her girlfriends. And she's the leader of the pack. It's not a pig—"

"I never said that!"

I let my friend have her triumph of not uttering what was thought. She said nothing for a while, and I was slow to ask her, "You think she'd be lonely? That no one would talk to her because of her weight? Kids aren't that shallow. Well, not all kids."

"You never go out," she said.

"What?"

Becky took a last pull on her cigarette and flicked the butt. "You never go out, Claudette. I must have assumed the same for your daughters. I mean, you'll go out with me, but it's not very often that we'll go, you know. What, once a month if that? Then, we just go to movies and dinner, or lunch. Sometimes breakfast. "

"And I'll overeat."

"That, too. But when was the last time we went dancing?"

"Hmm. Didn't Destiny's Child just make the scene, then?"

"No, it was a little earlier than that." She looked at me and she had an impish expression on her face.

"I suppose," I said. I thought back to the early days of Prince and The Cure. It was a while since I danced.

"Let's go dancing," she said. She beamed in my face with her challenging grin, the grin I get when she tells me to diet or exercise. "Really this time," she'd say during her personal training periods. "Five pounds a week. Only five pounds."

"Becky, I haven't danced in ages! And neither have you."

"I know and that's why we should go."

"I don't know any of the dances that are out," I had more excuses.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

"Bliss does."

And more excuses, "Becky, I'm fat, a big girl. No one wants to see me dancing," but I was already tired of arguing. I knew it was useless to argue against her. "Way too big to jumping up and down," I said.

"Bliss ain't thin, Claudette. Look, you never get any exercise."

"Not this again," I said.

"No, not that. Listen. You're with me, you're eating. You're home, and you're eating. You're on your feet all day at work, but you're eating! Tomorrow night, we're going out. Two drinks maximum and no eats! We'll go out for salad— a big, dinner salad— and we'll go dancing."

That next day, Bliss and Vicki tried to show Becky and me how to dance. There weren't many dances that were named, but we were told by Bliss that it's in the way you move. "Mostly your ass," Bliss said. Vicki giggled. I told Bliss to use the word 'butt' instead of 'ass.' Bliss said that men would grab us and grind on our butts and expect us to grind back. We didn't believe her until we got to the club. Men and women were basically having sex on the dance floor. "Let's get one of those two drinks," I told Becky.

We drank low-cal, low-carb beers and smoked cigarettes. On the dance floor, an orgy took place. We sat and watched the people gyrate to the music in too little clothing. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but it looked like they were having fun. It also looked like something that I could never do. "I can't go out there," I told Becky.

"You sure can. And you will."

"I'm not dancing like that."

"You don't have to. Like Bliss said, do your own thing."

"Oh, boy, I'm taking advice from my daughter." We laughed.

Eventually, of course, we finished our beers. Becky was ready to go on the dance floor. I begged for the second drink, but she wouldn't hear it. "Why only two drinks?" I asked.

"You can't replace one addiction with another," she said. She grabbed my hand and yanked it. "Now Claudette, you're too big for me to drag you out there, so get your butt up and shake it!"

I realized I didn't have anything else to do and that, as I said before, it was impossible to argue with Becky. Also, dance clubs were made for dancing and we did drive twenty minutes to the city to try a foot at it. With all this in mind, I got up and followed Becky's lead to the dance floor.

It got ten degrees warmer immediately among all those sweaty people. I was so nervous that I couldn't remember anything that my daughters had taught me. I just kind of stood there, swaying back and forth, snapping my fingers. Becky, on the other hand, shook everything and looked good doing it. She was smiling. I smiled back at her. Where my hands, which I felt were too meaty and unsightly, were down at my side, Becky's were in the air rocking along with her. Where my feet were rooted, with just my knees popping in and out to give the illusion of moving, Becky's were lifting up off the floor and stepping knowingly back down. She seemed at home.

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

I looked at her face again. She was still smiling. Some guy, not bad looking, came behind her and put his hands on her waist. They danced liked that, slightly bending. She looked blissful. I thought of my daughters.

Right! I told myself. No more feeling pity for me.

I began to dance! No more inhibitions. Sure, Tom gave me my extra weight— chocolates for forgiveness, rich desserts, ice cream runs— but I'm going to use it in ways he wouldn't have imagined. Tom had gotten me fat. He did it on purpose. He controlled me by controlling my weight. Candies, cakes, potato chips and French fries. He never ate as much as I did, and he always did more physically. He got me pregnant and fed me for three instead of two. Again, I was pregnant, and eating for all four of us.

I thought of this, then forgot it. I'd made myself fat, too; no one forced-fed me. I could have said no along time ago. I could have stopped eating for Tom after he left. With this in mind, I just danced, and some guy, grinning as I was, grabbed my hands and danced me around the floor. This is happiness, I thought. I was not interested in my dance partner, nor did I have any high hopes about him. I was just having a good time. And I never saw him again. It didn't matter, because I knew that there would be more men and I would have more good times.

The next morning I expected to feel terrible. Contrarily, I felt great. Completed. I sang in the shower for the first time in six years. I toweled off looking forward to the day and when I dressed, I accompanied my actions with quiet hums. I had forgotten how well I carried a tune. I ate one bowl of cereal. Albeit a big bowl, but only one. Nothing fried. I wasn't hungry enough, but I wasn't sure if I wanted to lose the weight and didn't care if I did or not. Now I felt I inhabited my large body and was not inhibited by it. Just comfortable and content.

I kissed my daughters while they slept and then left the house. I got in my car (it's only a mile, Becky would say, but I felt content and not insane!) and drove to work.

Six o'clock Sunday morning wasn't bad. No one was up that early on a Sunday, but that was the time the welders usually came in, and they picked my restaurant that day. Since I was the only member of the wait staff who was not a God-fearing Christian, I was alone with the cook and the busboys for three solid hours. The early birds, those who went to seven o'clock service, came in at eight or half after. Every waitress The Miser employed was there for the after-church rush.

The welders came in with their A-shirts and scuffed Dickies jeans. Per usual, Tom didn't look at me. And like every Sunday morning, there was no rush. Usually, I would go out back and quickly inhale a cigarette to calm myself. Not this time, I told myself. I walked right up to their booth. "What'll it be, boys?"

They started laughing. What did I do about that? I told myself to keep smiling, but soon the smile started to feel like plastic. Instead of stopping the smile, I started laughing. Tom stopped laughing and asked me: "What can be funny to something as sad as you?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

Asshole, I thought, but I said, "You couldn't begin to grasp it, Tom."

They all laughed except for Tom, who looked like he had lost a battle. I wasn't laughing, either, but I was wearing a wide grin.

"It's good to see you happy, Claudette," said one of the welders. "You have a beautiful smile and you should show it more often."

Tom shot him a look. I blushed.

"I had a good time last night," I said, "so what is you guys' excuse?"

"Ah, Claudette," said one of Tom's coworkers, "if we don't laugh, we couldn't bear to do anything else."

I nodded at him. "I know it more than you, sweetie." Sweetie. I said sweetie. I felt the part and oh so good. "Now boys, what will it be?"