

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

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Yellow

My mother killed herself when I was three. Her favorite color was yellow. I don't remember that. It, like all the other facts about her, is a tapestry wove with details, stories, and memories from others. People tell me who she was to them and I twist and turn her into what I believe she should've been.

"Mom was going to be a nun until Dad knocked her up," Jared, the eldest, added this to my mental fact book just after I turned thirteen. I couldn't tell if he said this to shock me. She never went to church or prayed. He also enjoyed lying. We sat on the wooden swing in the back smoking a cigarette, a stub really, stolen from my Dad who worked the night shift at the car wash. During the day he made copies at the local print shop, claiming the monotony kept him focused and calm. He told Uncle Jim this last week as they grilled burgers in the backyard. After mother died, he couldn't keep things together and they canned him at the dealership claiming he didn't have the personality; Mom did, but never had a chance to showcase herself because of us. 'I wasn't meant for sales,' he often said, as if this somehow excused him for losing the job which fed us.

"How do you know?" I asked. Jared was fifteen, and the wisdom held in the two extra years he had on me, made him an authority on almost everything. "Don't believe me numb nuts. What do I care? I'm trying to help you out because you're sort of pathetic. Damned orphan." He called me this at least twice a week which made me wonder, if I were an orphan, wouldn't he be one too?

"Was she pretty?" I never understood why this mattered to me. In my mind, I pictured one of those 1950's TV moms though her death happened twenty years later. For some reason it was acceptable to have a dead mother, but not an unattractive one.

"You've seen pictures. Besides that's gross. Kind of like feeling up your sister." We didn't have any sisters; the idea sickened me just the same. "I think I'm heading to Sparks to pick up some Swedish fish. They got purple in the other day. Dicky Nords told me. Fat shit probably already ate them all."

After he'd gone, I sat by myself for about an hour and then pretended to hear Mom call me in for some Tang, my favorite. And she'd always have a batch of homemade brownies with walnuts fresh from the oven. Of course, deep down, I knew most moms (even the TV ones) wouldn't let you eat unlimited brownies with Tang, but this was a fantasy, so I took some liberties. The inside of the kitchen changed conforming to my ideals. An island sat in the middle, and the dilapidated oven still left to remind me of my mother's failings, as well as our familial ones, turned into a shiny pink monstrosity filled with aromatic wonderment. The glass shone, not a streak, as she sat reading the latest magazines and drinking mint juleps, an idea I pilfered from a short story we read a year ago in school about a Southern Belle who wipes out her whole family with a poisonous batch. I wonder why certain things stick.

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"You home?" Three hours later, as I sat in a stupor from the imaginary sugar coma, Dad walked in. He deposited his pack of Lucky's on the burnt-orange counter, a veritable eye-sore next to the jaundiced stove, quite possibly responsible for my mother's demise, and threw a TV dinner in the oven. The same one my mom used to bake herself to death. That's how she died.

Most women handle suicide delicately by taking pills while they listen to Barry Manilow on the stereo. Shrinks say this is because they don't want to die; it is rather a cry for help, a displaced attempt at gaining attention. Men, conversely, seem to truly commit by shooting, hanging or in some other way violently disfiguring themselves. As if death by one's own hand is not enough, they relish the pain. From what I'm told, my mom was an over-achiever never one to back down. We must be like Dad; he's a slacker, who mostly watches talk shows and eats junk food. I find myself considering whether this was true before Mom's death or is merely a result of it.

"I'm here," I say as I join him in the kitchen. The stove is yellow, not like lemons, more like butter, pale and washed out, which I hate. I picture Mother, dinner sitting on the table (a fact confirmed by my brother, meatloaf and potatoes, though he was only five), waiting for Dad to come home and unload on her about his day. This, too, is something told to me by someone else, dad's sister, a large woman who smells of tobacco and stale perfume given the unfortunate name of Ida.

My mother looks at the house, it's diminutive size and suffocating décor too old to be labeled nouveau modern, but not old enough to be called antique. Most of the stuff surrounding

her was picked up at yard sales and Catholic school bazaars she'd attended with her overweight sisters. The meatloaf burns, and the potatoes fall apart when she adds the butter, beyond mashed into pulverized, unsuitable for consumption in middle-class domestic suburbia. I see her pull the door down after turning the oven light on, one of its only bells and whistles—no use dying in the dark. Besides the light is yellow, her choice color. She stares at it, as she drifts, the stink of a burnt and failed dinner lining her nostrils. A perfectly ironed dress sits on the board waiting for the next day. The pleasant gingham pattern in shades of fuchsia and white are lost on my father who uses the polyester/cotton blend to cover her body before I enter the room. Though his gesture is wasted on me, I'm only three, I won't remember a thing.