

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

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Stanford Avenue

They all looked alike on Stanford Avenue. Box-shaped little two stories that either did or didn't have shutters, did or didn't have a stone walkway, were or weren't fronted by lush, succulent Azaleas in the spring. But otherwise, exactly the same.

When I picked up Pam for school, I would leave my house at one end of Stanford and walk south until I reached her house on the other end. I never walked on the sidewalk, always in the middle of the street. There were barely ever any cars. It was not a road that took you to or from anything important. The only reason to drive Stanford at all was if you actually lived on it.

There were thirteen houses between our two and in my mind each household had a little story that went along with it. If, while making my way down the block, I didn't have anything better to think about, my mind would rattle off these house stories, one after another, as if they were the tickertape feed of stock prices, each story getting exactly as much time as it took for me to traipse past the house itself.

First, the VonHoffmans. Mrs. V. had six kids and a scar on her belly that you could see when she wore her bikini. She spoke with an accent and someone told me she once worked as a spy. That was the story.

The McDermotts. In all the years I lived on Stanford, the only person I ever saw come in or out of that house was a teenage boy. His name was Baker and he walked with a cane, although I never really knew why. I always assumed his handicap kept him out of Vietnam. But where were his parents? Buried in the basement? Is that what you get when you name your son Baker?

Most of the stories were meaningless. Just something to pass the time.

Mrs. Manzi's house was next. She had two upper lips. Behind her main lip was an extra one, pink and pulpy. It was only in evidence when she was talking, but once you noticed it, it was hard to see any other feature on her face. Mrs. Manzi had been one of the few fun substitute teachers at my elementary school. But nice as she was, her son was a pig. It was this fact that made me walk extra fast past their house. Unless Pam was with me. Pam could take Mrs. Manzi's son. That had been proven in street fights time and again. If Pam was with me when I walked past that house, I was happy to take my sweet time.

My stories went on like this, house after house. It never occurred to me whether they added up to anything. I just assumed they didn't. For example, I never realized that Mrs. V.'s belly scar was the result of birthing one of her six children. At thirteen, I didn't make those kinds of connections.

One house near Pam's belonged to an older couple with grown children. Two aluminum folding chairs sat on the small slab of cement that served as their porch. The woman in this house once had throat cancer and as a result, her voice box had been removed. She had some kind of hole in her neck, an apparatus embedded inside from which her voice

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

now came. She didn't even sound human anymore. Her voice was echoey and mechanical and emitted in short bursts, like a kazoo. I was especially troubled by this woman's circumstances and by the time I ticked off her story I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach and wiped my mind of all thoughts entirely until I arrived, two houses later, at Pam's door.

Pam was always very early or very late. Never, ever on time. On the early days, she would make her way to my house and pick me up, even though I lived in the opposite direction of the bus stop. Together we would walk back down Stanford Avenue. In the warm weather, when we both wore tee shirts, she would gently hold the flesh of my upper arm, because, she said, it was soft and cool. My arms, even in middle school, looked like those of my grandmother. They were meaty and full; their flesh jiggled. Pam's arms were long and lean and full of muscle. In fact, that's how you could describe her entire body. She stood six inches taller than me, even though I was a full six months older. As a tall girl, you might expect her to slouch or droop, especially since there weren't many tall girls in our school. But Pam did neither. She inhabited every inch of her large physique with a sense, if not of pride, then at least of entitlement. She seemed to occupy the world in much the same way.

I didn't really enjoy having her hold my arm flesh, but I tried not to let her know that. She was what was known as a tough girl. She had a short temper. I didn't want her angry with me, but beyond that, I simply liked being near her. When Pam and I were together, I felt safe.

So I would just take a deep breath and let her play with my flabby skin. I would listen to her coo about how much she loved it. And together we'd pass by house after house on Stanford Avenue without my giving any of them a second thought.

Pam's house had its own stories.

The structure itself was gray and the interior dark, most of the curtains drawn all the time. Pam would always greet me at the door, her forefinger up against her lips. She'd mouth the words, "Shhh. My father's sleeping."

He was always in the family room, always asleep. He'd ease himself into the brown leather lounge chair and appear never to move from that spot. Sometimes the television played low across the room, but most often it was quiet. Just an old man napping in the dark, kept company only by a thin slice of light that snuck in from between the drapes. That, and the tiny specks of dust that danced within it.

In truth, the old man was not her father. He was her mother's husband. I never knew Pam's real father; he was gone by the time she was two. She's never had anything to say on that subject except that he died suddenly and she remembers nothing about him. Her three older sisters might have tales to tell, but they don't live with Pam anymore. Barely come back to visit. Like Pam, they are all tall, all have thin, wispy hair, all have sad blue eyes.

But only Pam is a fighter. The others, I picture driving around in pale

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

colored VW Bugs with the canvas tops down and their guitar cases sticking up out of the back seats. They have leather peace signs hanging from their rearview mirrors. Their jeans lay frayed around their long, smooth feet.

Pam wears white ribbed tank tops and short shorts. You can see her muscles pulse when she walks, those in her neck flicker if she smiles. The hair, the skin, the eyes. She looks confused and vicious all at once.

In fact, she was really very pretty -- could even be considered beautiful -- if not for the fact that she always seemed about to beat the crap out of somebody.

We had a long walk to the bus stop each day and Pam had a lot to do in the morning. She spent forever in her kitchen moving between the sink and the cupboards. Drying the cups, putting them away, but always so slowly, as if she were underwater.

I myself had arrived a bit late this morning, but she was no further along than usual. She opened the door with her finger to her lips and motioned me quietly in. Once in the kitchen I could tell how long it would take to get out of there just from a quick glimpse around the room. Everything had still to be put away. It was as if she had done nothing.

"Pam!" I mouthed back at her. I had to make my face do the work that my voice would usually take on. But my "angry face" just made Pam giggle and because we were both still thirteen we each clamped our hands over our mouths and staggered into the dining room so we could release our laughter in short quiet bursts.

Once composed, we went back to the business of the kitchen. It was only early June but already the day was scorching. The kitchen shades were drawn against the heat and it was hard to work in such darkness.

I began drying dishes and placing them in the cupboard. This was the job I always took on. I knew where things went and I got them there quickly. I'd dried and put away cups, saucers and breakfast plates before Pam had even gotten the jelly back into the refrigerator.

She first had to get a paper towel. Dampen it. Wring it. Wipe the stickiness from around the rim. Rinse the cap. Get another paper towel. Dry everything. Replace the jelly jar to its rightful spot on the door shelf. And finally toss the used paper towels into the wastebasket under the sink.

Watching her was excruciating. After each step, she'd stop completely, as if she had to think for a moment what to do next. As if she had to recall where, precisely, she should set the jelly jar; where, exactly, the wastebasket was located, even though she'd done this a thousand times.

Had I been on time to begin with, her languor would not have been so troubling. My mind was on one thing only, and that was getting to the bus on time.

Missing the bus meant walking to school and walking took a long time. For one thing, we'd both be late and for that we'd both get in trouble. Pam

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

was used to getting in trouble so it didn't much faze her. But I was not. Plus, the day was already steamy and it wasn't even 8 o'clock.

The walk to the bus stop was all uphill. Once we'd get on the bus I was always so relieved to dump my book bag on the tattered vinyl seat and take a rest from all the morning's exertion. As Pam fiddled with the jelly jar, I began to imagine us walking up the hill, finding no one at the bus stop and having to continue on the three miles to school. It would take a normal person nearly an hour on foot, but with Pam alongside me -- her slow, loping gait, and the squeezing and jiggling of my upper arm -- it would be a miracle if we got there at all.

Finally, the dishes were all put away, counters sponged and dried, dishtowels folded and replaced, crumbs swept up and discarded. Each of the Stanford houses had a small interior window cut into the wall over the kitchen sink that looked through to the family room. It was through this window that we first heard the old man snort and stir.

Pam's whole body stiffened. Both of us froze, daring not even to let out a breath. Once the familiar buzz of his snore returned, we slapped our hands over our mouths again stifling an exhale, a laugh.

I made a motion with my hand urging her to keep moving. She still had to put on her shoes -- clean white high-top sneakers with what seemed like a million eyelets.

On our way out of the kitchen, Pam stopped short. She pulled open the door to the freezer. I nearly walked right into her and it was then that I began to feel the war that was brewing inside of me. Part of me was willing to stay and wait for her, but the rest of me just wanted to get out the door.

I could feel the words beginning to form in my throat. The "Let's go!" which was about to come out not as a suggestion or request or even a command, but as a scream that was likely to echo in every dark corner of this now fastidiously clean kitchen.

Pam paid no attention to me as she reached deep into the freezer. What she pulled out was pink and stringy. I couldn't make it out at first, both for the room's darkness and also because it didn't resemble any food I was familiar with. Then, suddenly, Pam's shirt was off. She slipped the pink strings over her shoulders, positioning little triangles of cotton over her tiny little breasts. By the time I realized she was putting on a bra, she had already turned her back to me, with the clear expectation that I was to go ahead and latch it. The metal eyehooks, even with their plastic coating, were freezing cold. So were the straps. She pulled her shirt back on over her head and giggled into my ear, "On these hot days, I chill my bra." She gave my upper arm a quick squeeze and the burning, crazy scream that a moment ago was stuck in my throat dropped down through my belly into someplace between my legs. For a second, my whole body tingled. I couldn't catch my breath. And then the squeak.

Not me. The Barco-lounger.

The old man's voice was loud and he bellowed her name as if it were the only word he'd spoken in the last hundred years. In his voice you could hear his potbelly, you could hear his short stumpy legs and his gray

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

whiskers. You could hear his round spectacles, so thick that you couldn't even make out the eyes that sat behind them. You could hear in his voice his gnarled knuckles and every pair of polyester slacks he owned.

But it was the look on Pam's face that frightened me most of all.

I grabbed her wrist and started to lead her toward the front door. I walked with my eyes fixed straight ahead, trying to pretend that I hadn't noticed the yell. I pretended we were so concentrated on getting ourselves to school that we couldn't hear a thing.

The chair squeaked again and I could tell that he was now up and out of it. He entered the foyer. I could smell him perspire. I willed myself not to turn toward him, to just keep moving to the door, to open it, to lean on the storm-door handle, to pull Pam out after me and to run down the short lawn into the bright white of the day.

The old man moved surprisingly fast and at once he was behind us. He grabbed at her and I could hear the smallest sound come from the back of Pam's throat as she shook her wrist free of him. I reached down and grabbed her high-tops off the floor. We pushed out the door just as I'd imagined; it slammed shut behind us. As we ran down Stanford, gulping in the hot morning air, I glanced back and caught a glimpse of him, his hands pressed open-palmed against the glass.

Neither of us looked back again. Once we reached the hill, we spent the whole ascent debating how long the old man would stand there watching us.

"He's mad now," I said.

"He's always mad," she giggled, giving my arm a squeeze.

"I mean really. He's still watching us. I can feel it."

"I should give him something to watch!" This was just the kind of thing Pam would say before she started punching someone out. But this time, she merely grabbed her shoes from me and sat down in the middle of the road to put them on.

I nudged her with my foot. "Get up, you moron. Get up and walk!" But she wouldn't budge.

So I left her there.

When I reached the top of the hill, I looked back and she was still lacing up her second shoe. The bus came a moment later and I got on it without her. I collapsed into the seat, an ache in my chest. I thought it was my lungs, the sucking in of heat as I strode to make the bus. But the pain remained with me all through the morning and I finally realized that it wasn't my lungs that were aching. It was my heart.

We didn't have any classes together, so I don't know if Pam ever made it to school that day. She wasn't on the bus ride home.

I tried to call that night but the line remained busy. I imagined the old man had come after her that morning, jumping in his red Valiant and stopping just short of her in the middle of the road. It was always crazy to me how Pam would drop her book bag at the slightest provocation from

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/3

anyone on Stanford, fists high, eyes narrow. The boys were so respectful of her. Even Bernie Grecko, who had his own muscle tee and casual strut going on. Yet the old man, he could bring her right to her knees.

Anytime I asked Pam why she was so afraid of him, she would never say. It was just another house story. I filled in the blanks on my own.

The next day, I felt more brave than I ever had in my life. It's not as if I were going to confront the old man myself, but I thought some of my own renewed sense of justice and humanity, of what a teenage girl should and shouldn't need to be afraid of, might be picked up by Pam and make her feel more courageous herself. As I walked down Stanford, I even forced myself to think about the woman with no voice box. I imagined what she might sound like on the phone. I pretended I was her grown daughter and that I'd called her that morning to ask how to make a casserole. I imagined her reading the recipe to me over the phone, each ingredient sounding remarkably like every other ingredient. Instructions blurted like short toots of a horn.

I was still wrapped up in this fantasy when I reached Pam's house. I knocked, quietly at first and then louder, maybe for a full three minutes before I finally rang the bell. When no one answered I stepped back onto the lawn and looked up at her bedroom window. I half expected to find her trapped up there, clawing at the glass trying to break free.

I must have tripped over a rock or something because the next thing I knew I was lying on the grass, blades sharp and dry against my fleshy arms. If the woman with no voice box had been on that cement stoop of hers, she would have looked at me and thought she was seeing someone outstretched, soaking up another sun-filled morning. It never would have occurred to her, as it hadn't yet to me, that she was seeing a girl who had lost something. Something that she couldn't even begin to fathom.

I pulled myself up and ran to Pam's front window. I tried to find her through the crack in the heavy lined curtains. But they were drawn too tight. And besides, it would always have been too dark to see the nothing that was left inside.