

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

Matt Potter

Lint

"I *cannot* believe you just did that!"

And Nathan looked at me, skewed, like a parent, dark eyes angry, jaw snapping under his wispy beard.

Paul gulped, choking back on the cafe latte he'd been drinking as he chuckled. And looked at me too, dimple chin glistening wet across the table.

I breathed in, the smell of coffee and hip talk and indignation filling my nostrils. And bent down in my chair to pick it up off the polished concrete floor. But Nathan grabbed my elbow and pulled me back, almost wrenching my arm from its socket.

"For Christ sake, don't embarrass me more!"

Suddenly the world stood still and every other patron in the café bored holes into me. The skin on my face prickled and flushed: I must have looked sunburned!

Paul put his glass down and his ring flashed – the ring I knew Nathan had given him – in the light. Oh, I thought I could roll with the whole gay ghetto this-is-my-ex-and-we-can-all-be-friends thing. But what did I know – I was wearing corduroy!

My hands sank into my lap as I sat back in the chair. I really wanted to say, *So, just what is it you see in me, Nathan?* But he had picked up his cup and was looking across it, at Paul.

"What did he say then?" Nathan continued, sipping.

"Oh well, you know. The usual," Paul said, and wiped his chin with the corner of his serviette, then looked at the stain before folding it and putting it in his pocket. "Just that it was nothing and he'd send the bill later."

Nathan laughed as he put his cup back on the saucer again. "He can be a bastard that way."

"Well, he was looking pretty peaky when he said it. I couldn't tell if he meant it or if it was just the gastro talking."

I took the menu from the centre of the table and eyes searching the page, pretended to study it. Did I want something to eat or did I just want to look busy? This kind of talk could go on for hours.

"Too much rich food will do that to you," Nathan said. "He needs to lighten up on the *beurre*."

I let the menu slip into my lap and looked across at Paul. I did not share his dimpled chin but we both had rich, thick sideburns creeping down our jawline. Nathan loved to run his fingers down mine, and then put his hand under my shirt – I still wore shirts then – and rub my stomach. "I adore your hairy stomach," he'd say. "It's so sexy." Paul must have had a hairy stomach too. That much facial hair usually travels.

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"Are you still going to stay with Phyllis and Barry?" Paul asked, scratching his nose. Was that a secret signal? I had not yet met either Phyllis or Barry, but the visit was an annual one, something Nathan and Paul had done every summer when they were together.

"We haven't spoken about it," Nathan said. He sighed, glanced at me like I was a dummy in a storefront window, and scratched his chin. "I don't think Phyllis will like Mark."

Paul looked at me, a smile half playing on his lips – half saying exactly what, I couldn't tell – then turned back to Nathan. "No, you're probably right. I don't think she would like him."

Why wouldn't she like me? I wanted to ask, but at that moment the menu slipped out of my grasp to the floor and Nathan saw I had my hand inside my shirt again, fingernail digging, fingers rolling.

"No!" Nathan said. "Don't you *dare* pick more lint out of your navel and throw it on the floor!" He sat back in his chair, chin stuck out, eyes stony.

I bent down to pick up the menu. And looking up at the counter as the plastic slid further along the floor, saw the waitress – crisp white blouse, creamy complexion, light shining from her eyes – smile at me from behind the coffee machine.

"God loves you," she mouthed, though it was only Saturday.

And half in fear, half in relief, I half-smiled back.