

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

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The War at Home

THE SUNLIGHT SEEMED RELUCTANT to let go of the colonnades, bleeding a deep orange as it was led away by its equinoctial twin.

There was something trying to move from the back of Lucy's mind.

A feeling, not totally unfamiliar to her but one she thought might subside after Minerva was born.

And certainly not one she was eager to engage so soon to Lucas returning from Afghanistan.

Next Wednesday. Baltimore-Washington-International Airport.

What would she wear? Her hair?

It had been eleven months. When he last left, she could not convince herself to be sad.

And today, her happiness vibe stretched no further than Minnie.

The porch floor needed some paint.

When first married, they envisioned screening it in.

So many things; simple, doable and now she couldn't recognize them in a police line-up.

The house was a fractured old home of crooked jambs and horse-hair plaster walls.

It was the hearth in the kitchen that sealed the deal for them.

She remembered the logs crackling and that glow that filled her eyes and his.

It was as if they'd been melded into each other and created a new alloy struck from that winsome night.

She sighed. Sometimes, her thoughts amused her. Alloy.

She imagined a person sitting across from her, who, at times was sympathetic, then again, because of her penchant for theatrics, not quite convinced.

"Okay honey, its getting late, please gather your things." Lucy said.

To name her Minerva, was Lucas.

She was afraid she'd grow into that name; alone, aloof, forever caught unawares.

Lucy refrained from sounding it.

"Minnie? Did you hear me? You can help me make dinner."

"Yes Mamma."

Lucy cleared the table of the Dollar Store circular where her mother suggested she could find red, white and blue bunting to decorate the porch.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

But she wasn't looking. Though Minnie pointed to a doll with a strangely elongated face.

"I see that," Lucy said, "she looks like grandmom."

Minnie, repulsed, as if she'd eaten a lima bean, handed the paper to her mother.

After dinner, Lucy spread the mail out.

She handed the colorful brochures from a phone company and religious groups to Minnie.

"Mamma? Why don't you never look at these?"

"Well, I don't need a new phone and the others are usually asking for money."

Lucy, absentmindedly opened a letter addressed to Lucas.

It was an invitation to participate in the Memorial Day parade. The letter referred to Lucas as a hero several times.

She was married to a hero. And yet, she couldn't be happy about that.

"Honey? Your daddy's a hero."

"He is?" Minnie said, unraveling a glossy photo of Padre Pio.

"Do you remember when your dolly fell into the bathtub and you pulled her out?"

"Yes!" She said, enthusiastically.

"You, were her hero."

"Mamma? Look at this man's hands."

"What about them? Oh. I see. The nail holes. I don't know why anyone would mail those silly things."

"Why nail holes?" Minnie said anxiously.

"Well, its actually something called a stigmata."

"I don't like it." Minnie said. "Poor man."

"I don't like it either. Junk mail."

Lucy heard her mother shouting from outside.

She closed the medicine cabinet. Her lipstick glistened in the mirror, more than usual.

"Minnie? grandmom's here! She's outside. I'm not dressed."

Minnie peered through the curtains.

"She's tryin' to put a yellow ribbon around a tree!"

Lucy adjusted her bra to cover a ladybug tattoo on the outside slide of her breast.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

The frosting in her hair was thinning and her roots like a school of black prawns parted stubbornly through the comb.

She remembered a play from high school.

She'd been cast as the daughter of a store clerk whose son had been drafted into the army.

But it was the overall sadness that each part required.

She recalled her line; 'war is serious business', and repeated it to herself in the mirror.

She imagined herself a gorilla and bared her teeth.

"War is serious business."

Better.

But it carried the detachment of a tornado striking a trailer park a thousand miles away.

Even Lucas's pay seemed to arrive apart from the rest of the mail or the mailman, a veteran himself, purposely arranged it so, as if he would never allow the clutter of circulars, sweepstakes, church suppers to diminish a soldier's worth.

"Mamma? Who are you talkin' to?"

"No one. To myself honey. Did grandmom come in?"

"She's still outside."

"Why don't you go out and help her and I'll be right down."

Lucy peered through the bathroom window at her mother.

Tomorrow, the TV crew would be out to interview her. She still wasn't sure she wanted her mother there.

The way she gushed her enthusiasm for the war, the tone of her shameless support for death.

Lucy never liked it because of Minnie.

Lucas had confided he was more concerned about getting separated from his unit or worse, captured.

Lucy's supervisor had granted her the day off but without pay.

She thought maybe she might mention that to the TV people but she decided against it. She was the only one at the drycleaners who spoke any English.

The outfit she had picked out for the interview showed a little too much skin according to Arlee, her best friend.

"A soldier's wife should look like his wife and not his girlfriend." She said.

"Whatever." Is all Lucy could muster.

"Mother, please don't give Minnie any candy." Lucy said, twisting into her coat sleeves.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

"Well?! How's it look?"

"What?"

"The ribbon for goodness sakes! Look!"

She held open the door.

"Very nice mother. Remember, no candy."

She stooped to kiss Minnie.

Lucy glanced at her mother and for a moment she detected an unwillingness, that perhaps she sensed all along Lucy's reticence to expose herself. Her family.

"It'll be fine honey."

"Mother, I'll be a little late tonight, I have to stop at the drugstore."

"Of course."

"For make-up mother."

They shared a laugh. Although at times Lucy worried that she, not her mother, was least likely to be agreeable.

The commute to work was her most peaceful slice of the day. She gained a perspective from the lay of the land that swelled with dairy cattle and new spaces with each trek.

Lucas had come into her life on this drive.

She had run out of gas. He was nearby cutting hay.

At first, she refused his help, embarrassed.

He shut the tractor off and folded his arms across his bare, sweaty chest.

Lucy settled uneasily into her predicament, cranking the radio up. She thought Lucas flinched to U2.

A state trooper pulled behind her. Satisfied, he left.

Lucas approached her car again.

"Nice." He said. "But what if I changed my mind?"

"Did you?" Lucy said.

"No."

The soldiering part of their lives represented their really first challenge together.

When Minnie came along, most misgivings took their place behind her well being.

The next, was naming their daughter.

The name, Minerva, had belonged to Lucas's grandmother.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

It was no more an important name than his own or Lucy's. Although he impressed upon Lucy, Lucille.

"That appears no place," she said, "except my birth certificate."

"And my grandmother's, on her tombstone."

"Very well. But can we agree we'll call her Minnie?"

"Agreed." He said.

Then Afghanistan.

She couldn't find the place on a map.

Lucas was swept away for nearly a year.

And now, he was on the cusp of returning home. Lucy could not be happy about it.

She thought maybe she ought to see her doctor to see if she wasn't suffering from some hormonal squeeze, a lack of estrogen?

She should at least be physically attracted to seeing him again after all this time.

But she wasn't.

She didn't even like the idea of sharing a bed again.

When she got to work, a bouquet of flowers awaited her. And all of the regulars had signed a card.

She could not muster a single thought that might not ruin the moment.

She wondered about the soldiers that came home crippled, broken in spirit if they, like her, were largely condemned by a loneliness whose restrictions were as real as any limitations.

When she got home that night, Lucy placed the flowers on the counter next to a note in Minnie's scribble.

She opened it, a drawing of the three of them.

Lucas with a funny hat was smiling as was Minnie in the middle.

Lucy was drawn with a frown.