

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/1

Terry Kitchen
LITTERBUG

I HATE TO LITTER. I really do. But sometimes my husband gets home earlier than I do and I can't take the chance.

So I stop, not too close, take a last swallow, open the door a crack, reach down and leave the mini-bottle on the street, right next to the curb. At least they're plastic these days – I don't need flat tires on my conscience. I sit there a minute, let the warmth spread and dissipate, then pop a mint and drive home. I pull in the carport, exhale onto my hand to check my breath, glance in the mirror to check my lipstick.

Maybe everyone feels like I do, like they're acting, careful to not upset whatever apple cart they've talked their way onto. Even Sofia, my daughter, all of five, has learned the Golden Rule – everything's perfect whenever Daddy's around. She has a problem, she comes to me. She needs to act out, bawl her head off, pout, fine. But Daddy's car pulls up, or he walks up the stairs, she zips it up, gives him a Shirley Temple smile. She knows we're guests here in this world of deep pile carpeting, Lexuses and separate dining rooms only for special occasions.

SUMMER'S THE WORST, daylight savings time. I have to be extra careful no one's watching, no nosy neighbor out walking their dog, no kids playing Star Wars in the cul de sac. Stop, drop the bottle, drive. It's not just my husband – I have to be cautious, pace myself. I never go to the same liquor store twice in the same week. I never leave a bottle in my car. No liquor at home. Never buy more than one bottle at a time. Always pay cash.

Maybe I'm lucky my husband's such a Boy Scout. If we were normal, at least the normal you see in the movies – candlelit dinners, cocktails, wine with dinner, champagne before every fuck – who knows if I could handle it. As it is, it's twelve hours of detox out of every twenty-four. I usually wake up before dawn, a light sheen of sweat on my forehead, skull gently pounding in rhythm like waves coming in at high tide. I lie there, counting breaths and squeezing my knees together until first light, planning my day: which liquor store on the way to work, which at lunch, which on the way home. Then I get up, take an aspirin, go down to the basement, ride the exercise bike until Sophia wakes up.

I MET MATT SOPHOMORE YEAR. I was work-study, a server in the breakfast line, and he had an early econ. class. First glance I could tell he was a fucking MBA waiting to happen. He'd order toast, but he'd never have the time to wait for it. Finally I started making it for him ahead of time, even buttered it. He'd swoop in at 7:55, cut the line, and I'd hand him a little paper bag with two pieces of wheat toast.

We saw each other at a party, a typical dorm dance with all the pre-laws and pre-meds racing each other into oblivion. First thing he said to me was, why do they have to drink like that? Can't they just dance? I agreed. I left my drink on the table and never went back for it.

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I WAS NEVER A PARTIER, not like those drunken white sorority girls getting gang banged at frat house orgies. I could never let my guard down like that even if I wanted to. But I understood the pre-laws and pre-meds, trying to cope with the pressure, trying to make the grade. Alcohol helped. Still does.

I'M NOT EXACTLY FROM THE BARRIO. I don't have a Mexican accent, except when I speak Spanish to my uncles and aunts. My parents came north a long time ago. They pretend I was born here. I do too. My father, a carpenter and then a contractor, is proud I went to college, even if it was work-study. My mother still doesn't speak much English. Matthew's parents invited them to dinner when we got serious. I think my mother just nodded the whole evening. But my parents could see this was my chance. No speeches about marrying Raul the mechanic and having eight Catholic children by the time I was thirty. No. Matt's parents had a pool, and an address Mexicans only see when they're carrying leaf blowers.

MATT TELLS ME I DON'T HAVE TO WORK, I could stay home with Sophía and we'd just about break even on childcare. But I'd torch the place in a week, or else binge on vodka until even Matt could tell I was drunk. Sophía's the one I worry about. I don't know how exactly, but she knows I've got a secret. I don't do liquor store stops when she's in the car, haven't since she was a baby. But maybe she sees how I look away whenever we pass a bar or a liquor mart, feels the shudder in the car as my foot tries to decide between the brake and the accelerator. Hopefully by the time she puts it together I'll have something on her, Maybe I'm lucky Sophie's got her grandmother's Oaxacan cheekbones and shiny black hair – if the shit ever does hit the fan, Matt's family may not want a Mexican American princess on their hands.

THE WEDDING WAS SURREAL, like being swallowed by an amoeba. Matt, being Matt, didn't want any alcohol. His parents finally overruled him, so they wouldn't have to take shit from their friends. They also made sure the bar had Dos Equis, so the handful of my relatives and friends who made the guest list felt welcome. Matt's parents paid, despite my father offering, and I still don't know how much it cost. Their location, their minister, their menu, their florist. Who the fuck has a florist? At least the band didn't play "La Bamba." Every speech, they made a point of welcoming me into the family. I don't recall anyone from my family getting near enough to a microphone to welcome Matt into ours. But I guess that's why I was marrying him. If Matt doesn't drop dead from overwork before he retires, and I keep my drinking under control and don't get bounced out on my ass, Sophía's going to be worth more than all her Garcia cousins combined. She can have a pool. She's already got a birth certificate, a real one, safely folded in our safe deposit box. If ICE gets me tonight, she's still way ahead in the game.

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I OPEN THE CAR DOOR, STEP INTO THE TWILIGHT, feel the evening breeze rustling through the carport. I take a breath, cooled by the last vestiges of the mint I've been sucking. Twelve hours and change until my next drink. Fuck. I put my hand on the doorknob. Perfect wife, perfect mother. Showtime.