

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

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Trouble Man

I awoke from a deep sleep hearing the sound of screaming. Some commotion. A fight. I got up out of bed. I couldn't hear any specific words, but it was a fight all right. Right outside my door I heard a thump, a banging, more screaming. So I opened my door, and right there on the walkway I saw a man, a big man with a bald head, dragging a woman by her feet. She was holding onto the railing. He was trying to pull her loose. I stayed in the doorway and said, "What are you doing?"

They both froze. The man's eyes burned mad-dog fury at me. The woman gripped the railing, her head down. There was nothing that I could imagine that could yank her loose. That was a righteous grip. A life-grip. Oh man, I thought, this is someone else's problem. Why am I getting involved? This can only lead to trouble.

Then the man let go. And without saying a word, he turned and went down the stairs. That was it. He was gone. I couldn't see where he went, and it was a very real fear that he might come back.

The woman didn't move.

"Are you all right?" I said.

It felt like I stood there a long time in that open door. She didn't speak, didn't move. I could hear her breathing, though.

"You okay?" I said again.

And then she looked up. I could see the fight-haze clearing from her, could see her coming around. I think I knew something of that place. And I could see her fear like graffiti bolts around her chest. She stood up. She was tall, slender, straight black hair, eyes wide with black lines under them. She was in blue jeans, no shoes, a sleeveless t-shirt.

"Can I come in for a minute?" she asked.

That was the last thing I wanted, to have her in my apartment, especially if the man came back. I didn't want anything messing up my parole, and this felt like something that could mess up my parole. But what else could I do? "Sure," I said, and I let her come in and closed the door.

She sat down on my couch, leg jittering fast. "You mind if I smoke a cigarette?" she asked.

"No, go ahead."

She lit up a cigarette. She smoked it hard. I could see her mind working fast, too, calculating escape routes. Then she jumped up and looked out the window. I almost asked, is he there? Then she went across the room to my little kitchenette. Then she came back. "Do you have a phone I could borrow?"

"Sure," I said, and I picked it up off the table next to the bed and handed it to her.

She went back to the kitchen, and I heard her trying to talk quietly to someone in those loud hiss-tones. "...can you get me?...yeah...now..."

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please...no, I can't stay here...please...yeah...I'll see you, just wait out front."

I looked out the window myself, then, but I didn't see anyone.

She came back into the room. She had finished her cigarette and started a new one. She sat down on the couch again, leg going like a piston. I sat down on the edge of the bed.

"I'm sorry about this," she said. "And thank you. I don't know. He might have killed me. He could have killed me. He's capable of it, I know that. No one else came out. I'm sure they all heard."

I didn't say anything. I was just hoping that whoever she called would come fast.

"He's fucking crazy. fucking high. Fuck. Fucking asshole."

She was trembling, close to crying, hands shaking, cigarette shaking.

"Your boyfriend?" I don't know why I said that. It didn't matter to me.

She sort of snort laughed.

"I wouldn't call him that." She looked at me then. I don't know what she was looking for. Judgment? "He moved in with me not that long ago. He's supposed to be in prison. Seriously. He would be in prison. I mean it. He's such a fucking loser. A thief. Dealer. He would've been in jail, but the cops fucked up and forgot to read him his rights or some shit. So they had to let him go. He was arrested, and they had to let him go. And then he moves in with me. I let him move in with me."

"You live downstairs?"

"Yeah. You just moved in, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"I've seen you. I'm Sharon."

"Tom."

"The asshole's Rob. Avoid him."

A silent, nodded, minimal, formal agreement passed between us, odd in the moment, this moment quite intimate as I stood in the middle of one of the worst moments, or what looked like one of the worst moments, of her life. But what could I know of the moments of her life? That twisted dream narrative? You open a door...

"...My friend will be here any minute, and I'll get out of your space."

"It's okay," I said. But I knew I would feel better once she left. Although, now that I had opened that door, I had no idea what was coming next, what I had let myself into, what this man, Rob, would do. She seemed to know what I was thinking, and she gave me a look, something, that said she didn't know either.

And so she smoked. And we listened and waited.

"He's insane," she said. And her leg jittered so hard I could feel the floor shaking.

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And we waited. Every sound jolted us both with the thought that he was back. She got up and looked out the window, sat down, smoked, rubbed her upper arm, rose, looked out the window, sat, smoked... I sat there, trapped in my own apartment. Heavy dread.

The friend arrived at last. Sharon jumped up when she heard the short horn blast. "That's them," she said, looking out the window. "Really, thanks. And I'm sorry about this."

"Don't be," I said.

She opened the door but hesitated. There was still the gauntlet to pass, going down the stairs, that troll down there waiting. Fear radiated from her in a pulsing red corona. She glanced at me, smiled, then went out and ran down the stairs. I watched. Her friends in the car below opened the passenger door for her. She jumped in, and the car took off with a sound like I'm outta here.

I only waited a moment, looking down the stairs, listening, feeling the empty street cool radiating. Then I closed the door, turned off the lights and went to bed. I lay awake for a long time listening to the nothing that was there.