

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

*Nina Rubinstein Alonso*  
**Unmentionable Etude**

GRETA'S EYES ARE STARTLED BLUE, her face round, and she has an assertive way of widening her mouth with a sharp intake of breath, illuminating words as if in neon. After a fall injuring her right wrist, "I'm hurting, can't do anything, don't want to hear your problems," she's the center of her own whirlwind, annoying, though I've known her for years.

She lives with Mike in a neighborhood once inhabited by workers who rise early and carry bag lunches, now rented by students and arty types. Don't know how they got together, but she makes silver jewelry and small sculptures, and he builds things, sometimes using parts from old machinery.

"An inventor, applying for patents," Greta says, showing me a photo of Mike on a wheeled board, hands gripping a pole bolted to a sail puffed out by the wind. "That's how I sprained my wrist," glossy tears pooling, "riding the Roller-Sail on the beach, hit a pile of kelp."

"Not as bad as last year," I say, remembering when she went climbing and cracked a rib.

I teach in a small college, write poems my friend Renee compares to psychic mystery maps, squeak by financially, live in an attic with slanted ceilings and floorboards painted shades of green by someone who maybe ran out of pine and made do with olive.

Over dinner at Renee's I meet Angela, a nurse married to Dennis, a lawyer working with refugees. They're in heated discussion when I leave, but later someone's banging on my door.

"Claudia, let me in, for Chris' sake," Dennis? Drunk?

"Dennis?"

"Having issues with Angela, splitting up. Shit, I figured you'd understand!" banging the wood so hard I'm afraid it'll crack.

Since he's playing that angle, I figure he's heard I've just divorced for the second time. Trying to sound assertive, "I'm not a therapist, got work early tomorrow," not sure who to call for help. My downstairs neighbor, a soccer-playing woman bigger than Dennis would have muscled him out, but she's biking in Maine.

Feline face, angled blue eyes, stocky, Renee says he's moody and drinks. But I don't care, as it's another man taking center stage, expecting me to be sympathetic and mop up his mess. I'm silent, wait until he stops hollering, gives up, clumps down stairs, lurching out the front door. Not sure how he'll get home, but I don't care as he's been a huge pain.

Phil and I were together less than a year when I left, angry at myself for rebound-marrying a guy I didn't love after I divorced someone who disappointed me, though I didn't love Eliot either, in fact wasn't sure what love was or what it would taste like. Mom scolded that it's impractical to crawl though a second divorce and struggle on an adjunct's salary, but Renee, also recently divorced, understood.

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Others kept their distance though I wore nothing sexy at gatherings, wasn't interested in their men, a pretty boring lot, felt too bruised to flirt. But by the weird chemistry of divorce, occasional husbands would call or show up hoping I'd be an easy target, and I'd have to get rid of them.

One afternoon Mike's knocking, tall and athletic, curly brown hair, dark eyes. Puzzling why he's with Greta, can't make sense of relationships, mine or anyone else's, useless trying to understand how people connect and disconnect. Bored correcting freshman papers, I open the door.

"Saw my post-doc advisor and thought you'd like to see these patent application drawings," he says, a lame song if I ever heard one. He plops himself on the couch explaining his updated Roller-Sail has electrified wheels on a wider panel. "I knew you'd be interested," he says.

"How's Greta?" I ask, as we'd never talked, so why think that?

"She's a little better," scrutinizing his drawings.

I have a bad habit of politeness, sometimes with types who don't deserve it, don't say that the Roller-Sail looks dangerous as I just want to get rid of him. I'm mad at myself for opening the door, but before I can decide what to do, he grabs my shoulders, pushes kisses at my mouth, unhooks my bra and unzips my jeans with fast fingers.

"Mike, stop," I say, but he's pleasing himself, not me.

"Don't worry, I'm careful," yanks my hand to his penis and comes with a hot gush and a satisfied sigh.

"What about you," dabbing himself with tissues. I'm disheveled, unbuttoned, unzipped, disgusted at two minutes of selfish sex, now offering a hand job?

I shake my head, "You didn't even ask?"

He's sliding guiltless hands up my thighs, saying, "You're so slim," comparing my body to Greta's bulkier one.

"No," I say, pushing his hands away, hating breezy comparisons, hating him, wishing I knew karate so I could flip his silly ass, glad when he goes to the bathroom.

I wash at the kitchen sink, zip my jeans, pick up toss pillows, straighten the couch, notice a blotch of man-glue on the spread so stuff it into a laundry bag, frustrated at getting into this stupid situation.

Hear the phone, let it ring.

Mike counts pages in his folder, making sure nothing's lost under the couch. Then, "See you sometime," eyes predator narrow behind tortoise-shell glasses.

I hate confrontations, have a hard time deciding what to do, takes me so long to sort out my feelings it's usually too late to say anything clever, anything true, or, often, anything at all.

"Got work to do," I say, but why don't I holler that he's a selfish bastard and I hate what he did? He's a muscular type, and I want him out of my apartment more than I want to make a political statement or start

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a battle that might keep him here longer. Once he's gone I lock the door I never should have opened. After marrying and divorcing two jerks, wouldn't you think I'd know better? Never mind that I was bored and lonely.

I soak in the bathtub, swear I won't make this mistake again, no more fiascos with Mike or anyone like him.

Next day Greta calls saying, "Can you come over? I'm upset, not sure what to do."

Has Mike told her he was with me or does he keep escapades private, locked in his briefcase labeled 'unmentionable etude'?

I say, "Sorry, busy today," and why automatically apologize? Can't risk running into Mike, don't want to hear what's bothering Greta, don't want to listen to bleats of rage or sorrow while I nod in pseudo-sympathetic silence, resisting the urge to tell her to shut the fuck up.

If he knocks, the door stays shut, if he calls I'll hang up. I've had as much of both of them as I can stand.

Weeks pass, but nothing happens.

Mid-August, I see Greta near the magazine stand in Harvard Square, no bandage on her wrist, looking stylish in a swishy green dress. She's with a short, bearded guy she introduces as Pierre. We smile, say how busy we've been, meaning that if we never see each other again, that'll be just fine.