

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

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Some Things We Can't Have

A woman and a girl stood out by the road, side by side, leaning back against an old maroon Lincoln. The woman was picking through the bunch of keys she held in her hand, while the girl smoked a cigarette with fierce concentration, as if she would rather eat it. They faced a squat, white, stucco building. In very small print, the sign on the wall next to the door said *Women's Health Clinic*.

It was a small, quiet street. There were oak trees with birds singing in them, and bright, clean puddles of sunlight trembled on the sidewalk. An occasional car rolled by slowly, as if the people on this side of town had all the time in the world.

The woman was dressed in her work clothes: a black vest over a blue shirt and shapeless grey trousers. A name badge, which was nothing more than a flimsy plastic sheath with a safety pin stuck to its back, was fastened over her left breast. It announced to anyone who wanted to know that her name was "Lina" and that she was a hostess. She was averagely pretty. Her eyes were wide, and she had the dazed, startled look of someone who has fallen asleep and woken to find herself in a foreign country. She sighed, or yawned.

The girl ignored her. She slouched. The hand that wasn't busy with her cigarette fiddled with the metal stud in her left nostril.

"I've never been here before," said the woman when she was done sighing. Have you been here before? I mean, in this neighborhood?"

"No, mom. This is my first time." The girl pulled on her cigarette with her eyes narrowed and her cheeks sucked in. Her skin was raw and spotty, and her bangs fell into her eyes.

"It's a nice neighborhood." The woman had picked out the smallest key in her bundle. It was tiny and simple, like a key to a diary. She flipped it over and over between her thumb and index finger, not looking at her daughter. "It's not really what I was expecting."

"What were you expecting?" asked the girl. "Witches and cauldrons?"

"No. I don't know."

"Rusty coat hangers? A giant vacuum cleaner?" The girl pressed on with obvious relish.

"Stop. No. I'm just glad it's not horrible. Not like that." The woman sighed again. "What do you want for dinner? We should have something nice."

"Something nice?" The girl sounded incredulous.

"Ice cream. We could eat ice cream and watch a movie."

"Whatever."

"Well, let's see. Chocolate ice cream or vanilla? Bananas?" A small twitch had appeared at the corner of the woman's mouth. "When I was your age I used to love bananas. I would eat them all the time, moun-

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tains of bananas. But now I'm not so sure. It's funny how things like that change. Why would a person want bananas one day, but not the next day? If I could go back in time, I would ask myself to explain why exactly I was eating so many bananas."

The girl flicked the butt of her cigarette away onto the lawn of the clinic. "Jesus Christ, mom," she said. "What is the *matter* with you? I'm not interested in bananas."

"Goodness. No bananas then." The mother's eyes were wide, amazed.

They stood in silence.

"Do you know what this key is for?" She held up the tiny key.

"I don't know. It looks like a key to a suitcase. Whatever." The girl ran a hand through her hair, briefly allowing herself a clear view of the way forward. "It's almost time to go in."

"I was thinking that it looks like a key to a diary, but I don't think I've ever kept a diary. Have you?" She looked at her daughter with sudden curiosity.

"No. Why would I keep a diary? Nothing interesting ever happens in my life."

"I don't think that's true. Lots of things happen in your life. What about that time you were on TV?"

"It was an accident."

"What do you mean an accident?"

"I just happened to be in the store where they were filming. It wasn't like anyone *wanted* to film me. I was, like, in the way."

"Well, you could keep a record about things like bananas, so that later you could go back and try to understand what you were thinking all those years ago."

"Mom! I don't *think* about bananas. I think the same things that everyone else thinks. I'm not *special* or interesting enough to have a diary."

"You're not?"

"No." The girl took her box of cigarettes out of the pocket of her jacket. "I'm just the same as you," she said. She sounded defeated.

A woman came out the clinic door. She was dressed smartly, in a nice, navy-blue wool blazer and gleaming black heels. She was quite pregnant, maybe six or seven months.

The mother coughed, a little too loudly, because the woman turned to glare at them before she walked away down the street, heels clicking like a metronome pulling the day quickly forward.

The girl lit another cigarette.

The mother sighed. She asked, "Do you want to know what happened at work this morning?" She spoke as though she had just then stumbled across a thought in her head and was surprised by its presence.

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"Not really, but go ahead." The girl exhaled a trumpet of grey smoke into the spring air.

"Well, this is the sort of thing I would write in a diary if I had one. I would write that Sam the maintenance guy came to work today with a dead cat. He had it in a shoebox. It was orange. The cat was orange, not the box. He showed it to me and I asked him why he had a dead cat in a shoebox, and he said it was his own cat, and his wife found it dead last night, curled up on their bed, hard as a rock. They didn't know how long it was dead or what killed it."

"Why did he bring it to work?" The girl's voice was distant.

"He was thinking he was going to put it in the dumpster in the parking lot, because he doesn't have a garden to bury it in."

"Disgusting."

"That's what I said. But Sam said it was just a cat, and it was dead, so who cares. But then Maxine saw him - you know Maxine - with the box and asked him why he had a box. She said he couldn't put a dead cat in the dumpster. She said it was against code."

"Why would it matter?" the girl asked. "You could put a hamburger in the dumpster. How is a cat different?"

"I guess it just is. Somewhere somebody said that a hamburger can be trash but cats can't."

"I don't think they are different," said the girl decisively. "Dead things are dead."

"Maybe," said the mother. "But that's the sort of thing I would write in a diary if I had one. One day I might be interested to remember how Sam brought a dead cat to work."

The girl puffed out her cheeks with frustration. "Why don't *you* just get a diary then."

"No. Not me."

A plume of smoke billowed into the silence.

"So what did Sam do with the cat?"

"He waited until Maxine went up to her office for lunch and then he put the shoebox with the cat in it in the dumpster. When he came back in he told me how sad his wife was about the cat. He said that she had the cat since she was in school. Since she was your age."

"Good for him. All the cats and boxes and bananas can go into the dumpster."

The amazed expression returned to the mother's face. She turned her eyes back to the key. Maybe you are right. Maybe it's a key for a suitcase."

"We don't have any suitcases," said the girl. "We're poor."

"We manage."

"We're *poor*," the girl insisted.

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"I suppose so. There's some things we can't have."

This time the girl ground her cigarette under the toe of her sneaker.
"It's time to go in," she said. "Are you ready?"