

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/2

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The Chickpea

You're eating dinner when the cramps start. The tugging ache causes your smile to twist into a grimace. Your half-eaten quesadilla lays abandoned as you press your nails into your palm. *This is normal.*

Once the bleeding starts, you go to a movie. The theater popcorn you'd been looking forward to turns to a buttery sludge in your mouth. *A lot of people bleed in the beginning.* You'd be lying if you said you paid much attention to the movie.

The pain has gotten worse by the time you see the doctor. Framed by the dishwater gray sky behind the murky window, the doctor tells you that the test has come back negative. They tell you to prepare yourself for the inevitable, handing you a pamphlet. They tell you to call the office once you've passed the tissue to schedule more hormone injections, as if your world hadn't just imploded. *Maybe they're wrong.*

You become a prisoner of your bedroom for the next few days, staring at the plastic red container filled with discarded needles across the room. The pain has reduced you to a wet pile of putty. You try to avoid the restroom, but nature demands attention. As the blood sloughs out of you, something dense, no bigger than a chickpea, sits cradled amongst the carnage of the tissue.

Icy dread rolls down your body in a thick slime. Without another thought, you pluck the mass from the glob of uterine lining and wrap it in clean tissue. You place the small mound by your bedside and sink back into the mattress. Your eyes never blink, focusing on the scarlet blooming on the two ply.

A warm hand squeezes your shoulder, and a glass of water appears in your eyeline, altering your perception. You drink, the grumble in your stomach sternly reminding you that you have not eaten since the sodden popcorn. Your eyes fall back to the balled-up tissue on your side table. The ache in your heart dwarfs any hunger pains you may have had.

You wake up in the hospital, a needle pumping fluid into your arm. A nurse threatens to admit you to the psych ward if you don't eat. Someone pats your hand and a bowl of soup slides into your view on the table before you. It isn't that you were not eating purposefully, you had merely not been hungry. After the soup has been dutifully ingested and the IV has dripped, you are released.

You move the chickpea to a crushed velvet necklace box when you get home and place it in a drawer. You glance up at a mirror to your immediate right and the reaper stares back at you. You see a wretched monster. A murderer of babies. You dig your nails into your forearm until they are stained crimson. An angry hand yanks your nails away from the bleeding flesh. Your arm is patched in silent rage, the door slamming afterwards.

You bleed for a month. The time comes when the world insists on your return. Work is to be done. Your bank account demands funding. Coworkers greet you jovially, asking how your vacation was.

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Fantastic, Betty! My body murdered my baby. How have you been?

You somehow muster a hollow smile to assuage them. You guard the secret of your chickpea and are not quite sure why. To your great relief, work keeps you busy, until you catch the murderer's reflection in the shiny surface of your desk. You find your nails have buried themselves into the tender flesh of your arm yet again. You tug your shirt sleeve down to cover the bloody crescents. Then you finish your workday.

Weeks pass in the same fashion. Hollow smiles. Work. Red waning moons. Repeat. You come home to an empty house each night. You are aware someone important used to share the space with you. The foggy memory of an argument, crying, and the packing of bags climbs into your mind. No longer will a large warm palm comfort you and give you glasses of water.

It's just you and the chickpea.

Your frozen dinner has been blasted by the microwave, a large glass of wine sits before you, and silence pulls up a chair to join you at the table. The chickpea remains in its box in your drawer. You swallow the food without tasting, drink the wine, and cry yourself to sleep on the couch with sharp fingernails hooking into your arm meat.

You've taken to wearing long sleeves at work, even in the sweltering August heat. You claim the air conditioner blows directly on you. You really want to hide the moons dotting up and down your forearms. You don't consider the moons as self-harm, after all, it isn't as if they will leave a scar.

After excessive needling from your co-workers, you find yourself at happy hour instead of eating dinner with silence. You may have over indulged as your head is a bit warbly and a lazy grin has plastered itself on your face. Your co-workers decide to bar hop after a round of lemon drop shots. It occurs to you that this is the first time since the chickpea that you have had a glimmer of happiness fill your heart.

Susan From Marketing gasps and all heads swivel in her direction. She is jumping up and down beside the smiling Chelsea From Accounting. Chelsea From Accounting announces she is twelve weeks pregnant. There is a collective shriek through the group while the floor falls out beneath your feet. What little happiness had begun to sprout in the darkness was stomped on by Chelsea's kitten heels. It is as if the sink holding all your feelings was suddenly uncorked, emotions flooding through the drain. You can see a couple of faces turn your way as tears spring to your eyes and blur your vision. Your chest tightens, heart hammering, and you step backward into the street. You swear you didn't see the car before it hit you.

But maybe you did.

The hospital lights sear your corneas as you awake. You can see your left leg is suspended in the air by a pulley system, encased in a cast. You can't move your arms and your neck is being held still. A man with a full red beard touches your hand and rushes out of the room. Your eyes are still adjusting to the light when the bearded man returns with a doctor. She smiles sweetly at you and asks the man to step out. He looks crest-

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fallen as he locks eyes with you. You realize now, this is your husband. The same man who left you in your time of anguish. You don't remember him having a beard when he left. He shuts the door behind him with a soft click and the doctor pulls up a chair beside you.

"You were hit by an SUV," she says, "You were very lucky."

You haven't the heart to tell her how wrong she is.

"I wanted to ask," she taps her clipboard with her pen, "Were you recently pregnant?" Ice runs through your veins.

"Yes. Ended in miscarriage," you whisper. This is the first time you've said the words aloud. They taste like vinegar in your mouth.

"Ah. I'm very sorry for your loss," she gently touches your non-broken leg in sympathy. The doctor's eyes slide over your exposed arms, no doubt noticing the crescents. "It may give you some small comfort to know that we found fetal cells at the sights of your wounds. This sometimes happens after miscarriage or birth. It's called Fetal Microchimerism. When a mother's experienced trauma after a pregnancy, the fetal cells in the blood rush to the sight of trauma. The cells can help repair damaged tissue by forming new blood vessels. You nearly bled out," she paused, "So what I'm trying to tell you, is that your baby helped to save your life." The doctor's words fade into the beeping of the machines. Big lumpy tears blur your vision as the realization hits you. A part of your baby will live in the same body that killed it, for years, according to the doctor. You ask to see your husband now. The doctor nods and pats your fingers again. "I'll send a psychiatrist down to speak with you," she says before exiting. You quietly thank her.

Your husband returns seconds after the doctor leaves and sits in your eyeline. He apologizes for leaving. He sobs into his hands and apologizes until his voice runs out. You grip his arm, and he looks up at you.

"You were grieving too. I'm sorry for not understanding," you whisper. He presses his forehead against yours, unable to wrap your broken body in an embrace.

"We're partners. I should never have left you to carry this alone."

You close your eyes and allow the solace to engulf you. You both understand the healing will take time and work, but a piece of your baby will live on inside of you.

And that will have to suffice.