

## Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

*Lili Monde*

### **The Story of (a Girl) a Woman**

MY NAME IS HOLLY, and I am a woman—one of many.

I am in my final month of university, and simultaneously feel a sense of boundless liberation and unbearable nostalgia brimming on the horizon.

From an extremely young age, I felt the need to take on every burden in the world as my own. In an odd way, I now realize how selfish and egotistical that is. But growing up, I made everyone else's problems my problems too—something I've learned is more common than we realize in all of the women among us. As a result, I became hell bent on doing something with my life that would leave a lasting "impact" on our world. I did not believe that storytelling was the realm to do that—I thought of things far more grandiose, like venturing into space or forging international relations—but I now realize I could not have been more wrong. Telling a story is sometimes the most grandiose thing you can do, sometimes all the world needs.

I am a storyteller and I am a woman. I have seen a lot of the world at the age of 21. For all of my teenage years, I felt significantly older than I actually was—an anxious rush to grow up underscoring every decision I made. I had life-ending thoughts before being able to drive a car, I learned that my body was worth more than my personality before I even got my first period, and I fed into an endless feedback loop of "what's the point?" having barely breached the double digits of my age. I spent the majority of my most critical developmental years in what I now know was a toxic relationship with a man several years my senior. From ages 15 to 20, the most formative time for establishing our sense of identity, I was unknowingly under circumstances that were stifling my ability to grow and learn about myself. Everything came to a head in the feverish midst of my teenage years, when I tried and failed to take my own life before even being a legal adult. Something about the fact that I saved myself felt unforgivingly pathetic at the time. I now want more than anything to be kneeling on the bathroom tile next to that seventeen-year old girl (woman,) begging her to understand that she deserves to be here.

I could not stare at my own reflection for years to follow. I told no one. I suffered in silence because somewhere along the way, I decided I could not ask for help. Asking for help would make me needy, overreactive, burdensome—all the labels a woman (girl) can so easily be stuck with. No, I was independent and I was strong—two traits assigned to me early on—and my life was idyllic to all those who looked into the fishbowl. They did not understand I was drowning, pressing my palms to the glass in desperation for escape as opposed to a passive hello.

I grew up fast, both physically and emotionally, and the world encouraged me—praised me—to do so; I was mature, I was smart, I was "beautiful" (sexualized.) I was only a girl. Society made me a woman.

It was at the close of 2021 that I finally drew a definitive end to the push-and-pull of an abusive relationship, something I derived my sole sense of worth from for as long as I could remember. I became acquainted

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with existing for the sake of someone else's pleasure, became acquainted with being a body instead of a person, and did not know how to move forward. At no point was I sad to no longer have this person in my life, but instead I became unmoored at the prospect of having to learn who I am without the bounds of codependency in a heterosexual relationship where my gender role—woman, selectively girl—was laid out *for* me.

The last year of my life has been healing, as I've learned to break down the walls of hyperindependence and self isolation. I was robbed of friendship for years, and re-learning that form of companionship was a long road. I have been told on several occasions that I am a completely different person now—both in appearance and demeanor. While in the grip of the aforementioned relationship, I took on the "role" of a submissive woman for five years, trying desperately to be feminine, wanting to be as small and as quiet as possible to receive the validation that I was conditioned from a young age to crave. The reality is, I am not small and I am not quiet. Pieces of me found their way to shine through in bouts of anger, but I would ultimately always end up at the same conclusion: I am taking up too much space as a woman (girl.) After losing my identity—my worth attached solely to sex and my body for years— I came out of this relationship believing that I was not actually a woman. I lost myself in more ways than I know how to describe.

Interestingly enough, this flicker of disconnection from my woman(girl)hood was extinguished in the latter half of last year as I began the early stages of falling in love with another woman. I quickly realized that I do not struggle with adhering to the "female" identity, but that I struggle to adhere to how a woman (girl) is supposed to behave in a male-dominant society. Whether we recognize it or not, there are long standing explicit gender roles in male-female relationships that undoubtedly influence our understanding of gender, of woman(girl)hood. This is not inherently harmful, but in the circumstances I was facing, my sense of self became distorted to the point of self-destruction. I have spent a *long* time in the last year of my life trying to rebuild "Holly." I had not seen her since elementary school.

Recently I realized that, for the first time since early childhood, I actually *feel* my age. I feel a contentness entering adulthood, and an oddly detached variant of pride. I did not think I would make it this far in life when I was still a girl (woman.)

I have learned that pursuing what makes you happy is far more important than pursuing what makes you appear "successful" to those around you. We do not have enough happy people—happy women, happy girls—in this world. It is still difficult to allow myself to fully sit in this thought.

I used to cry often, maybe daily, for the entirety of my teenage years. That stopped when I turned 20. Up until this week, I had not properly cried without apology for over a year.

For a long time, I thought I was not loveable, nor did I have the capacity *to* love. A few nights ago, cradled under the palm of the evening with a muffled TV droning on before us, one of the kindest souls in my life turned to me and said that I am full of more love, more light, than anyone she's met before. I am not one to show my emotions to my friends, having

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learned early on to *suppress suppress suppress* out of fear that they would leave me if they saw my vulnerabilities. And yet, in that moment, on that couch, I felt the undeniable sting of tears well up in my throat. My eyes burned, and a gentle smile crossed my best friend's face, half-illuminated by the flickering bluelight of the TV.

*It's okay, she said, please cry.*

And I cried. Truly cried, for the first time since the end of 2021. Every emotion bubbled up at my surface, and I let myself sob, let myself mourn the young girl who died in the grasp of the world— a flame suffocated and engulfed by the dark.

I told her, told her nearly everything. And a sad sense of familiarity flickered across her face.

*I know. I understand.*

I cried without apology, without justification. The tears began to subside an hour later, and we began to talk gently about the future. Our voices remained soft, two girls whispering with cautious optimism, as if afraid the world would take our words away if spoken too loudly. The future is a concept that is still new to me.

For the first time since childhood, I feel a blooming, inescapable sense of hope. Re-meeting people who know me from years ago feels vaguely like a badge of honor now; I have begun to take pride in comments like "I almost didn't recognize you" or "you're so different now" because I know at my core I am aligning more and more with my own sense of self as a woman. A woman defined by *me* and not by somebody or something else placing limitations on my behavior or expression. My skin is adorned with ink that the men from my past have not touched, the hair they ran their fingers through has been chopped off entirely, and the subtle glint behind my eyes that they extinguished is slowly glowing again. I still experience waves of anger about my own experiences, alongside the temperament around femininity as a whole in today's world, but I am slowly learning to reclaim my own woman(girl)hood as something that belongs to *nobody but myself*.

Hope comes in waves, and always will, but there remains endless proof in my life that I do love, that I am loved. I feel a gratitude for woman(girl)hood running so deep, a divinely feminine, flowing river at the pit of my subconscious, and I plan to ride the waves unconditionally.

I am a girl, and I am a woman.

And this is my story—one of many.