

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/1

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The Belt

In the morning, stiff kleenex litter the floor around her bed. When she picks them up, she's careful to use only her fingertips, though she knows the damage, if there is any, has already long been done. She takes HIV tests the way some women schedule hair appointments -- every six weeks whether they need a trim or not.

At the foot of the bed, twisted in the sheets, is his belt. She coils it in her hands like a snake, then sets it on the mantle over the bricked up fireplace. Her apartment, the entire floor of a brownstone in a good neighborhood, is a rent-controlled steal. The belt buckle winks and shines. When he calls later to ask if he left it ("it's real leather," he tells her), she lies, even though she knows he'll just call again. But by then she will be screening her calls, using her old answering machine, a gift from a jealous boyfriend who had, she discovered soon after their break-up, secretly copied down the access code from the directions before hooking it up to her phone. He is married now to a girl much younger than she, but with the same blue eyes and straight brown hair.

She knows she's a type. Pretty, thin, bookish in a slutty schoolgirl kind of way, the way that makes men want to take her home and fuck her, never suspecting that she does this on a regular basis. "We don't need a condom, do we?" they whisper. In more serious relationships, she always sticks to the number three when pressed to divulge details of her sexual history. Three has served her well.

She keeps the belt out for a few days, wrapping it around her waist, tightening it like a noose at her neck, and then she puts it into the box she keeps in the bottom of her hallway closet. Her fuck-and-found, her friends call it, rifling through it every few months in search of goodies. A gold watch that doesn't keep time she gives to a friend as a bracelet. An earring in the shape of a skull that, wisely, no one wants to wear. An assortment of ties, some she gives as presents to her father, her younger brother. Things left in the rush of dressing. "How'd someone manage to leave his shirt?" someone asks.

She shrugs, holding it up to her nose, still able to detect aftershave. "He was sweet," she says, wadding it back up before dropping it into the box and shutting the door.

A week passes and the man missing his belt approaches her in a bar. "I know you have it," he says. "I've been learning all about you." He pushes against the small of her back and her drink sloshes up in her glass. The bartender leans over.

"Give the girl some breathing room, pal," he says.

"No problem," the man replies, then turns to her. "Just give me back my belt." He slurs his words, his breath stale. In this light, he is much older than she realized, the skin on his cheeks thick and studded with pores. Usually she avoids sleeping with angry men.

"I don't know what you're talking about," she says, her eyes level on his as she brings her glass up to her mouth.

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"Bitch," he says, shoving himself away from the bar. She watches him leave before setting her drink down, her hand shaking. That night, she sleeps on a friend's couch.

The phone calls continue for several weeks after that, calls she lets ring and ring until finally the person hangs up. She knows it's the man because his number keeps flashing on her caller id. She dials it back one afternoon when she suspects the man will still be at work, and a woman answers. "Yes?" the woman replies cautiously when she asks for the man by name. "I'm his wife. Can I help?"

The girl quickly hangs up then feels badly about it, almost certain she could hear a baby crying in the background, the angry man's life coming into sharp focus. She retrieves his belt from the box in her closet and, using a paring knife, cuts it into small pieces she stuffs into the bottom of her wastebasket. The calls stop after that.

For awhile, she is careful to shake out the sheets, the blankets, lifting the pillows, and feeling around underneath the bed as men step into their pants and into their shirts. "Are you sure you have everything?" she asks, drawing her knees up to her chest.

"I'll call you," they say. But because they leave nothing behind, she rarely hears from them again.