

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Marina Cramer

Half the Bed

I

The bed is a plain double, not the new standard Queen or princely King, or the chaste pairing of his-and-hers Twins. Dressed for winter in a plain russet feather comforter, it is just big enough for two, with two pillows each, side by side: his on the right, hers on the left.

It is a simple varnished beech wood platform, elevated to accommodate a spacious storage drawer. They had bought it twenty years ago, in the first flush of second-marriage love, with hard-earned bonus money to burn. Strolling around New York's Chelsea neighborhood, they had relished the slightly seedy chic of trendy little sushi bars, family owned bagelries, second hand clothing stores tucked between once-elegant hotels and prewar apartment buildings, where Lamston's five and dime still held its own against the equally indispensable Duane Reade pharmacy.

They had found the bed in a store specializing in furniture for urban spaces. They liked its spare clean lines, so utterly at odds with the haphazard assortment of household pieces scrounged from family and friends to furnish their new lives. They paid the hefty surcharge for across the river delivery to New Jersey with no more than a moment's consideration of its extravagance.

II

Was it only two years ago Amanda stood at this bedroom window, watching Sam and Melanie walk purposefully toward the commuter bus stop, in observance of their own semi-annual Take Your Granddaughter to Work Day, matching backpacks strapped across their shoulders? Melanie's scaled down version held stickers and activity books, several favorite Beanie Babies and an American Girl doll with two coordinated outfits. His – the morning paper, a handful of client files, blank forms and traveling office essentials (calculator, cell phone, mini stapler, pens). Each had an ample supply of packaged snacks – the trail mix and peanut butter crackers without which neither seemed able to make it through the day.

Amanda saw them chat amiably in anticipation of a pleasant day, Melanie still young enough to enjoy the thrill of bus and subway travel, the bewildering crush of city crowds made manageable by her grandfather's seasoned guidance. In the sanctuary of his midtown branch office, she would charm the staff with her cheerfully earnest seven-year-old's manner. Do you have a job for me? Can I help you with something? I can do that!

Amanda did not have to be there; she knew this grandchild well. Through frequent overnight visits and a steady stream of telephone updates, Melanie and her captivating ways had quickly become the focal point of tenderness and delight in her grandparent's lives. Especially so for Sam, who, moments after her birth and in the pointed absence of the child's own father, had wrapped the squalling infant in the fierceness of his love.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Now she is nine, and he is dead.

III

"The car needs washing," Sam stands at the kitchen sink, swaying as though windblown. He steadies himself on the aluminum walker. No longer able to climb the stairs to the second floor bedroom or bath, his world is defined by the rented hospital bed and discreetly screened commode. The living room, computer-cluttered dining room, porch and kitchen are the limits of his restless round-the-clock wandering.

"Are you sure you're OK?" Amanda runs water into a plastic basin, testing the temperature with her elbow. "We can do this in your bed if you're not up to it."

"I can see the yard," he says. "Your flowers are blooming. I forget what they're called."

"Hyacinths," she answers, glancing at the row of corn cob shapes lining the dormant garden, their deep pastels impossibly bright against the faded winter grass. "And daffodils. You know daffodils. Do you want to do this yourself?" She holds out the lathered washcloth.

"No. I like your touch."

"Alright, then. But don't complain. It's been years since I washed a baby." She runs the washcloth lightly over Sam's sunken cheeks, catching on his two-day stubble.

"I'll shave tomorrow," he says, anticipating her question. "Not today."

Amanda rinses the cloth, washes the corners of his eyes and mouth, then his high forehead and behind his ears, with a quick pass over his head, now fringed with curly white tendrils of downy hair.

"You'd think the chemo would take care of that," he muses, lifting his arms so she can peel off his undershirt. "The shaving. That would be a plus."

"It's not a balance sheet," she says, applying long strokes to his back and chest, toweling with the left hand to keep him from getting cold. Killing the tumor, that would be a plus. Giving you back to me. She warms a pool of baby lotion in the palm of her hand, massages the papery skin on his back and sides, his spindly arms and hairless chest.

"That's nice," Sam murmurs, eyes closed, hands gripping the edge of the sink.

"You know, we get no preparation for this," Amanda grumbles. "I mean, I don't know how to care for you. It's not like raising babies – the instinct is just not there the same way." She slips a fresh shirt over his head. "OK, buddy, drop your pants."

Sam loosens the drawstring, steps out of the gray sweats bunched around his ankles. "Those of us with no nursing experience – and that's most of us – have no idea how to help someone with a wheelchair, how to get a person in and out of a car with the least amount of pain, how to

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

straighten sheets around a sleeping body." She slides the soapy washcloth over Sam's withered buttocks, smiles when he dips his knees to give her better access to his genitals. "I mean, those companies, I don't know – the big ones, the ones who pollute the air and water and food – they should provide free classes in caring for loved ones. It's the least they could do, after making so many people sick." She's down on her knees, washing carefully around the crusty purple lesions on Sam's shins, lifting each callused foot out of its soft leather slipper to finish the job. "Don't you think so? Wouldn't that be fair?"

"There's the rabbit," Sam watches the tawny creature hunched over a patch of early spring clover, the translucent tips of its ears twitching, alert to lurking danger. The rabbit's jaws grind rapidly in a frenzy of munching, while beady eyes scan the open yard for adventurous cats or murderous dogs. "Catch the moment," Sam says, tying the drawstring on his clean sweatpants with knobby emaciated fingers. "Eat your clover where you find it."

IV

"Can I leave her with you on Thursday and Friday? There's no school. Teachers' convention."

"Of course." Amanda glances at the calendar on the back of the basement door, notes the neatly red-inked Xs on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. "But you'll have to bring her and pick her up. It's a full moon."

"Ma, that accident was months ago," Teresa wails, her voice rising in exasperation. "You think some maniac is out there waiting for you just because the moon is full? I'd have to bring her Wednesday night, I'm in early on Thursday."

Amanda listens. She can still hear the screeching brakes, the sickening scream of metal ripping along the passenger door. Surely she had enough time to make that turn. He was at least half a block away, cell phone to ear. She didn't care about the car, didn't need the constant reminder of Sam's absence in her driveway. But why is this young man so angry? He looks civil enough – gray business suit, pale yellow shirt, red paisley tie, polished shoes. STUPID BITCH STUPID STUPID FUCKING BITCH The words cut into her. She cringes before his livid face, his mouth stretched into an enraged distorted sneer, spit flying, a tiny shaving cut dancing near his left ear.

Why couldn't Sam have been there to intercede? No one would have dared insult her then. There would have been no shouting; the excitable stranger, silenced by Sam's cool manner, would have produced the necessary documents and been on his way. Sam would have handled all the bothersome details, too, dealing smoothly with burly tow truck drivers and suspicious insurance examiners. Chances are, the accident never would have happened at all, his careful regal steering carrying them safely to their destination.

It had to be the moon, hanging there, ghostly blue in the late afternoon sky like a single porcelain plate on the too-large dining room table. How

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

else to explain her lack of judgment, the other driver's hysterical reaction?
"You bring her, Teresa, and pick her up."

V

Melanie and Amanda sit on the bed, their backs cushioned by pillows propped against the wall. They take turns reading chapters of Charlotte's Web aloud, absorbed in the world of talking animals and simple happy times. They close the book on Fern preparing to take her radiant butter-milk-bathed pig to the county fair.

"I put clean sheets on your bed in the guest room," Amanda tells the child, planting a kiss on Melanie's freshly washed hair. "Just brush your teeth and hop in. Shall I tuck you in?"

Melanie shakes her head. "No, I can do it myself." Then she hesitates. "Can I take the lion pillow?"

"Sure," Amanda smiles, remembering her own long-ago business trip, buying the pillowcases in a dingy rural variety store, a surprise addition to their self-made trousseau. A lion's head gazes serenely from the center of each pillowcase, wispy mane etched lightly onto the pale beige cloth. The simple gift had been a hit; Sam loved lions, appreciated the gesture.

She settles in on her side of the bed, her own book in hand. It's closer to the night table, she tells herself. Easier to reach the lamp. Reading in bed – the one point of contention in their marriage that she and Sam had not been able to resolve, either by compromise or by reasoned discussion. She has won, but only by default, paying the highest possible price.

An early riser, even on weekends, Sam had been habitually in bed by ten, sleeping blissfully by the time Amanda came up two hours or so later. "What do you do at night?" he had asked her once. "Why can't you come up to bed with me?"

"What do you do at the crack of dawn?" she had countered. "You're up by five."

"I read, or write a little, watch the morning news, prepare for my day. It's cool and quiet."

"Well, then." Amanda had replied cryptically. Forced to undress by the yellow glow of the streetlight diffused by lowered shades, bumping her shins against the bed frame's polished corners, she would slip into bed and lie awake awhile before falling resentfully asleep, Sam snoring quietly by her side. Their lovemaking, such an urgent preoccupation in their early years together, had dwindled to an occasional nighttime encounter, dampened by Amanda's fluctuating hormone levels, Sam's career worries, and finally by the insidiously creeping disease that sapped his remaining confidence.

Now, Amanda feels the child's presence before she sees her. Melanie stands in the doorway, the lion pillow held tight in front of her, covering her thin frame from chin to well below her knees.

"I'm missing Grand," she says.

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Amanda's hand goes out involuntarily, rests briefly on the comforter's smoothed surface, like an amputee stroking a flattened sleeve. She peels back the covers, pats the empty side of the bed. Melanie snuggles in, fitting her back into her grandmother's side, face deep in the pillow, knees drawn up to her chest. Soon she is asleep, her body a nugget of surprisingly intense heat, like a glowing coal in an ashen grate.

Amanda puts down her book, clicks off the light. She sits watching the room assume its familiar nighttime contours, the landscape of shapes and shadows both intimate and strange. "I know," she says. "I know."