

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

Len Kuntz
Cold Sore

She hears them. It's not hard. Bottles chink. Women titter and bump against furniture, the wall that's hers on one side and her father's on the other. He likes them young and blonde. He gives them pet names—Sugar, Polly, Trixie, Blossom and Bunny. It makes the girl cringe.

In the morning they are never there. She eats her cereal, noticing how loud the crunchy flakes sound. The big, moonfaced clock stares at her dumbly. She feels stupid and aimless.

She gets a cold sore one day. It begins as a white nub, swelling, filling until it's like a tire or hill on her lower lip, weighing her down, daring her to puncture it, to find a pair of scissors or a razor and slice the offending growth.

Kids at school say she has Herpes, so she has to look it up in the dictionary. She thinks about the words disease, loser, victim and dead mother.

When the girl wore dresses and braided her hair, her dad used to say, "Don't you look like a little lady?" She was even young then, but not an idiot. He always said nice things in the presence of her mother. "I like your hat." "You're such a good little girl." "You have a sweet voice."

The women came around before her mom died, heels in hands, tiptoeing past Mother's sick room. Even now, they all slink by wearing nylons. Some prefer lots of chinking jewelry. Others wear heavy perfume.

The girl can't stop touching the sore even though she knows that by fingering it she's creating spread. Sure enough, more lesions sprout up until her lip is a lumpy caterpillar. A ripe red rash runs down her chin, across her jaw, like a zigzagging mountain range. Pus-filled white caps line its length.

Now kids say she has ring worm. He has rabies. AIDS.

One of the women says, "You'd be prettier if you smiled," staring eye-to-eye so as not to take in the girl's lip. Another says, "There's an ointment for that, or surgery."

At night, with a ruckus going on in the next room, the girl lays in bed naked. She fingers the leaky sores, smearing the film over her body, massaging each crease and fold, everywhere. If she can get the disease to cover her entire being, then no one will want her. She'll be nobody's baby, nobody's girl.

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Trees

They were naked in the shower when she felt it—a corded knot much like a tree root where it should be smooth. She'd grabbed him there by accident, when he'd slid on the slick tile and almost toppled. She might have jerked her hand away any other time, but the bump—about the size of a wad of gum—by his testicle, well, it was a little alarming.

He grinned at her, him a drunken pumpkin, water splashing over his teeth, beating against his mouth and jaw so terrifically. He was clean enough now, the vomit mostly washed off except some yellow bits that had somehow become entangled in his hair.

She switched and rolled the left testicle in her fingers. There was no knot on that one.

He made a waving motion with his eyes, either a Come-on-yeah-Baby look or the start of another pass out. They'd been married fifteen years. He'd been this drunk every day for most of those years. Still he could often be unpredictable. Once he'd killed their cat with a plate. Another time he'd written her a suitable if not lovely poem.

In bed now he was a tent with a sheet over him, headless. There could be dirty laundry hiding beneath the sheet. There could be a man or anything. A corpse.

Even though it was 2:00 am, she made a cup of coffee. She had nowhere to go.

She sat at the table in her robe, staring at the night-blackened window. On the other side would be their yard if she could see it. Her patch of rose garden and the elm with the tree swing that had been meant for the girl and boy they'd had but lost in the car accident so many years ago.

She thought about the knot on her husband's testicle. She took a sip of scalding coffee and decided not to tell him. It had taken a while, but by now she was very good at keeping things to herself.

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Homework

There is not supposed to be blood and yet there are streams of it sliding like crimson slugs down the thigh, calf, getting sticky between the toes, pooling on the vinyl floor.

She takes a breath. While her arms are around him, she finds the knife on the kitchen counter. He must have known it was there. He isn't stupid. Fathers are supposed to know things.

He takes a breath himself, his belly pushing against her chest. He has never been so tall. He is a totem pole. How come she never knew? In Alaska, some totems serve as telephone poles. If you know what to look for, you can read a tribe's entire history, or at least what they're willing to share.

That reminds her—she has homework. Tomorrow there's a history test.

The knife handle his slick and heavy. She knows the blade is sharp. She has a choice—to save herself or sanctity and so with a wide swoop she plunges and does both.