

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/2

Sandra Florence

Sauna

Her sleeping body is slumped against the car door. When I come to a stop on a hill, I have to hold my hand to her chest, so she doesn't flop forward and bang her head against the dash. She grins through sleep, her eyes half opening and closing like one of those dolls with moving eyes.

Katy doesn't care that the Shakespeare Company is performing in Golden Gate Park free today. I'm the one who wanted this trip into the city. She wanted to stay home as usual, playing with her Barbie Doll Village, something she put together entirely by herself. I refused a long time ago to buy her any of those dolls, but somehow at the age of eight, through mysterious negotiations at school, she's managed to collect twenty-two of them.

After circling the block four times, I find an empty parking space just off Market Street and whip my small car into it just behind a big car (a Buick or Chevy maybe) trying to back into the same spot.

I don't say it but I'm thinking, better get rid of that land barge if you want to park in San Francisco. I give the driver a look and he gives me the finger and yells "bitch" out his window. I think for a minute he'll get out of his car and come after me, but he doesn't. I'm glad Katy is asleep. My confrontations with other drivers upset her and have gotten me in trouble many times. The guy yells something else and then drives up the hill.

When I pull on the brake, Katy's eyes flash open and she groans. Fog is beginning to roll over 17th St. down into the Castro. The N Judah chuffs its way out of the tunnel and stops at Market and Castro. The driver snaps the bell as people pile off and on the streetcar.

"Hey, our old neighborhood," I say giving her a nudge. She sits up straight, looks around, then flops back against the seat.

"I miss the city sometimes, don't you?"

"No. Are we gonna move again?" she asks staring at me. I ignore her, but I'm thinking I wish we'd never moved in the first place. Before she gets to noncompliant, I hurry her out of the car and down the street. We walk past Cafe Flore. People are sitting outside in the fog drinking wine. There are small lamps on each table inside casting an amber light through the windows. I'm tempted to stop, but Katy pulls at my arm and whines, "come on mom." I promise myself a glass of wine later.

A few doors down, we enter Fionellia's, an old bath house built some time in the 30's. Steam rises from the cracks under doors. The woman behind the counter, wrapped in pale blue cotton robe,

hair in a turban, is ageless. Is this Fionellia I wonder.

"A room for me and the kid," I tell her turning to point at Katy who is now flopped in a chair with both arms wrapped tightly around her small chest. She's sulking. This is a drag, I think. Trying to get Katy to do anything with me takes all my effort, all my enthusiasm. I feel like I'm dragging a small sandbag around wherever we go.

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Katy gives me a sneer when I call her kid. She doesn't like it at all, and sometimes she looks at me accusingly and says, "you don't act like a real mom," and so I say, "well you don't act like a real kid." That usually gets her. That stops her complaining. For a while, she refused to walk down the street with me. That was in my punk period when I was wearing my hair strange. Orange spikes in front. Green tail. But that didn't last long. I realized Katy might feel a little insecure coming home everyday not knowing what color her mom's hair was going to be. I told her it was only food coloring.

When I worked at the Planetarium, in Golden Gate Park, Katy spent some afternoons at the museum with me. While I sold tickets and seated visitors, she roamed through the Aquarium or the Natural History Museum. I'd often find her gazing at the T-Rex exhibit or the Birds of Prey presentation. When she rode the bus home after school, and I'd call to check on her. I could hear Peter Allen singing on the tape, When My Baby Smiles At Me I Go To Rio. That was her favorite song. She played it until the tape got fuzzy and warped. Or she'd bake cookies. Once when we didn't have any flour, she made them with Masa. They were awful, but I ate them anyway. Like I said, I always try to be enthusiastic where Katy is concerned, although sometimes she sees right through me.

"The child is free," Fionellia says looking at Katy, not really smiling but gently looking.

We get room number seven. A good number. A sane one. The woman hands me the towels and soap and two bottles of mineral water, and we begin the walk through a series of right-angled hallways. The air is stuffy and damp, smells like wet stone. We've entered the catacombs, the place where everything stops for an hour-and-half.

I watch Katy undress. She strips out of her clothes like a caterpillar leaving its skin. She has a long lean body that I envy. It makes me aware of my own, heavy, wanting to be new. She giggles when she sees me naked, though it happens often. "Hurry up mom," she says pulling open the old wooden door to the sauna. A cloud of hot air is released into the dressing room.

Now she's excited, in a hurry. I quickly hang our clothes on the two wall hooks and follow her into the dimly-lit room. There's a hose and a plastic bucket in one corner. There's a small frosted-over window where I see shadows passing. There are three ancient-looking steps to sit on. I climb to the third, where it's really hot, and sit down. I want to sit and let my mind go numb. Let the hot air envelop me. But Katy keeps asking questions. "How old is this place?" "Do you like it here?" Yes, I think to myself. I do like it. For some strange reason it comforts me. Katy is aware now that I've achieved my goal of getting us here, I'm beginning to slide away from her. If she weren't here with me, I'm sure I'd roll off behind some object never to be seen again. My head is a heavy black weight behind my eyes. I'm suddenly aware of the headache that never seems to go away, always waiting to claim my attention. I try to let the air seep into my brain.

"You're crying," Katy says calmly.

"The steam make my eyes water," I say trying to avoid her curious stare.

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"You seemed happy outside and now you don't." I don't respond to this, but we're tugging on the same line. Exchanging places and moods, taking turns happiness, fear, loneliness. It frightens me. I don't want her to notice my unhappiness, but she notices everything.

She begins pouring water into the bucket. She looks up cautiously with a little grin and flicks the hose water at me. It hits me like tiny stones. My first impulse is anger, and I jump off the step and hurl towards her. "I don't like it," I yell at her. She's bent over the bucket. Her face blank. She's giving me a chance to change my mind. Something in me collapses, and I push through the dark wall that surrounds me. My face breaks into a grin and then laughter. I grab the hose and give her a cold splash. By this time she's squealing as we struggle with the hose, and I have to tell her "shhhh" because this is supposed to be a quiet place, "a place of meditation." Occasionally, I let her overcome my strength, and she douses me, her whole body trembling with the laughter she's trying to contain. The cold water is a jagged touch on my flesh awakening me to my surroundings. The stale smell of the towels that have been washed a thousand times, the sheets that are as thin as gauze, the long narrow prison-like cots, the low mirror that bellies out a carnival distortion, the rocks hissing in the stone pit, and this moment of joy with Katy. Finally, she pulls away and I let her.

"I'm turning up the heat, do you mind?" I ask her. Katy couldn't care less. She's busy filling the plastic bucket with water again.

"Let's have a little truce?" I tell her. "No more splashing me with cold water for a while, okay?" I climb back to the top step and assume the 'fallen leaf' position. I'm ready to relax now.

"Okay mom," she says giggling. I know what she's up to. She finishes filling the bucket and begins to tug at the handle trying to lift it and finds she must pour out some of the water in order to carry it. The released water splashes around her white feet as she staggers under the weight of the bucket and her own laughter. A smile forms on my lips now, but I don't let her see. I pretend not to notice her struggling toward me. I'm excited, caught, wanting to feel the cold, yet afraid. She stops periodically, sets the bucket down and covers her nose and mouth to hide her laughter. I wait, holding my breath, holding my position curled up in a child's pose, my head on the floor, my spine exposed. She heaves the bucket onto the first step, climbs up and staggers almost losing balance. For a moment, I envision her falling back off the step away from me. My heart races, but this doesn't happen. I tell her to be careful. Her grin is enormous now, as she pulls the bucket to the top step and starts to turn it over. She lets go with a giant slosh. As the weight in the bucket decreases, she holds it higher giving the water more momentum. It plunges onto my spine. My eyes flash open. My whole body opens, each vertebrae stinging with needles of cold. I hold my position gasping for air, exhilarated, letting the water fall around me, close in, circle my knees and toes, splash up between my legs. I let the water run into my mouth which hangs open with shock and pleasure as Katy's laughter spills out into the air.