Arts & Humanities

Fiction: "Expectations Great and Small"

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They, all of them, asked the same question: “Has she met Theresa yet?” *She* was me. *They* were my husband’s family. Michael and I had been married two or three weeks, a City Hall ceremony, when he brought me home to Cambridge to meet his

sisters, cousins, nieces, nephews, and an uncle. Theresa was his aunt. His father's sister.

The Cambridge where Michael grew up was a neighborhood of immigrants and first-generation Italian Americans. His grandmother had tomato plants in the alleyway and kept a rooster in the yard that was a stone's throw from Harvard. "All I ever wanted to be," Michael told me, "was a professor. I'd see them at the coffee shops or browsing at the bookstores. I thought a professor was like a king or a priest. Something that you got paid to be, but it wasn't a job." My husband did become a professor. He was the only one in his family to go to college, the only one to leave the neighborhood. The rest of them stayed put, as if there were no place else to go.

"You know you have to bring her to meet Theresa," Marie said. "Don't worry. I'll go with you. For protection," and she and Michael laughed, a private joke. I envied the easy way Marie and Michael had together. She was his eldest sister, older by a year, and the resemblance was such that they could have passed for twins. Both were bowlegged. Marie got knocked up at seventeen. Quit school, got married, had the baby, a boy. Soon after, she had another. A girl. Already they were teenagers.

Early into that summer evening, Michael, Marie, and I walked to Theresa's house, which was around the corner from Marie's house. Theresa lived in the same house where she was born, the youngest of five children. "Our father was the oldest," Marie said, and she ticked the siblings off on her fingers. "Then came Rose, then Paul, you met him and his daughter, Gina. Then Johnny. Theresa was the baby."

Set back on a patch of dry, yellow grass, behind a waist-high chain-link fence, was the house. Worn down, two-story Cape Cod, with an oval-shaped dormer window. Gray shingles faded and chipped. At the end of the driveway was a small garage, in worse shape than the house.

With one hand, Aunt Theresa held open the screen door. Her other hand was jammed in her pocket, as if she were concealing a wadded-up tissue, or money. She wore a floral-print housedress, the kind with snaps up the front instead of buttons. On her feet were red sneakers. The laces were missing. Her hair was as gray and steely as her expression. "You should've told me you were coming," she said, and then a chin-jut nod at me. "Who's this one?"

"My wife," Michael said. "We got married a few weeks ago."

“They didn’t have a wedding,” Marie jumped in, as if breaking up a fight. “If they’d had a wedding, they would’ve invited you, but they didn’t have one.”

“I wouldn’t have gone to it,” Theresa informed us. “You’re not the first wife, you know. He was married before.”

Despite Michael and Marie protesting that we couldn’t stay, we followed Theresa to the kitchen. The gas stove was from the same era as the refrigerator, the kind that my grandmother would’ve referred to by its brand name: Frigidaire. The kitchen table was wrought iron. The glass top had a hairline crack through the center. We sat on metal folding chairs with padded seats. Theresa stood because she said it was too crowded for her to sit. “You want to wedge me in there? So I can’t move? You hungry? Some people, you go to their house, they won’t give you anything to eat.” She went to the cabinet, and although the hour was nearer to dinner than to breakfast, she brought out some Stella D’oro Breakfast Treats. She slid the unopened package across the table like it was a hockey puck. The cellophane packaging was grimy, and I imagined the expiration date: 08/79. “I’ll say this about her,” Theresa said. “She wasn’t that way. Your mother always put something on the table. Sucking candy you could break a tooth on, but something. I went to his house, your second cousin, a couple of weeks ago. You know, the Big Shot, and his snotty kids were standing there eating peaches in front of me, just staring at me and eating their peaches. You think anyone asked if I wanted one? The Big Shot and his wife, the Director, always telling everyone all the time what to do, but you don’t hear her tell her snotty kids to give me a peach.

Uninterrupted, Theresa recounted the injustices and insults she had suffered, and how this person was no good and that one was worse and he’s a liar and she’s a cheat and that son of a bitch should die by a slow heart attack. No one was mentioned by name. Some had titles: the Judge, the Movie Star, the Jackass. Others were referred to only by pronouns, but, as best as I could figure out, “he” was never the same as the “him” or the “he” from the previous sentence, and then there was You Know The One I’m Talking About. “The one who stole your father’s watch.”

This purging of the backlog of her resentment was like centrifugal force, and I was riveted by her. Amused, too. A one-woman show. I could’ve sat there, entertained, for hours, but when she got to the Movie Star taking flowers home from a wake, Michael and Marie exchanged a glance, a signal understood. They got up, and Marie

said, “Aunt Theresa, we have to go now. We have dinner plans.”

“Sure. Go on. Have your fancy dinner. Leave me here alone with nothing to eat. What do you care?”

My husband and his sister were out the door, but I hung back to tell Theresa that I enjoyed meeting her. In response, her voice softer — no, not softer, but quieter, almost the way a threat is made — she said, “You’re not the only one who’s married. I was married, too. Just you wait.”

I found Michael and Marie at the garage, where Michael was at the window, cupping his hands around his eyes to cut the glare. Then he stepped aside for me to look. There, parked in the garage, was a jaw-dropping, heart-stopping, iconic American beauty: a 1955 Thunderbird. You don’t have to be a car nut to know that car.

“You can’t tell from here because of the dirty window,” Marie said, “but it’s bright turquoise. Mint condition.”

In 1955, with all of the money she’d saved, which was pretty much all of the money she’d ever earned because her parents didn’t charge her for room and board, Theresa bought for herself every teenage boy’s dream machine: the turquoise Thunderbird. From the dealer’s lot, she drove it home and parked automotive history’s snazziest car in the garage where, more than half a century later, it was enshrined like a holy relic.

“Let’s ask her if she’ll sell it,” I said. I pictured myself zipping around in the turquoise T-bird.

Myself.

“No,” Michael said. “I wouldn’t ask her for the time of day.”

At a seafood place that was a knockoff of Long John Silver’s, while Marie, Michael, and I were waiting for our Shrimp Served Three Ways, I asked about Theresa’s husband.

“She told you?” Marie’s eyes went wide.

“Yes. When I said good-bye, she whispered that she was once married, too. Did her husband die? Or did they get divorced?”

“I can’t believe she told you,” Marie said, and then she related the story of Theresa’s marriage, or as much of it as she knew: Theresa was nineteen; she made her wedding dress by hand. That’s what she did for a living. Seamstress, and a good one, too. Hand-stitched little white beads all around the neckline and the cuffs in a pattern like lace. Hers was a church wedding. After the ceremony, all the sisters and brothers and nieces and nephews, aunts, uncles, and cousins went from the Church of the Blessed Heart to the gray house, which was nice enough back then. They ate and they drank, and they sang songs until the children, like the way puppies do, dropped in their tracks and fell sound asleep. Everyone went home, and Theresa and her new husband went to his house, which now would be her home, too. The next morning, Theresa returned to the gray house, to sit with her parents at the kitchen table, where they had coffee and biscotti. And there, Theresa stayed. No one asked why she left her husband the morning after she married him. What went wrong? And how wrong did it go? The husband was never mentioned again. Except for that one night, her wedding night, Theresa lived in the gray house with her parents until they died — her mother first, then her father — and then she lived there alone.

“What happened?” I wanted to know.

Marie could only guess. “Most things don’t turn out the way you expect.”

“But aren’t you curious? The marriage and the car? How could no one have asked what happened?”

“You met her,” Michael said. “Would you ask?”

“She tortured him.” Marie took a slice of bread from the basket on the table.

“Tortured her husband?”

“No. She tortured Michael. Do you remember that?” Marie asked him. “How she tortured you. When we were kids.”

“Tortured you how?” I said.

Michael reached for a piece of bread, too. “Oh, she’d lock me in a closet,” he said. “Or bend back my pinky finger until I thought it would snap. Once, she bought cupcakes for the girls, only the girls. Chocolate cupcakes.”

“And she made him sit at the table,” said Marie, “and watch us girls lick the frosting off the tops.”

“What about your parents? Why didn’t they stop it?”

“They didn’t know. She was a sneak. In front of them, she’d give me a big hug and a kiss and then whisper in my ear. ‘Just you wait,’ she’d say.

Just you wait. The same thing she said to me. Just you wait, but for what?

“And she did these things to you, too?” I asked Marie.

“No,” Marie said. “She didn’t torture the girls. Just Michael. The boy.”

“The boy,” I noted.

Some years passed, and on a rainy Saturday afternoon, Michael and I were at home, both of us in the living room reading, when the quiet was interrupted by Marie calling to tell us that Theresa had died. “Peaceful,” Marie said. “In her sleep.”

A peaceful death, but a miserable life. In that old house gone to seed, Theresa got through her days finding purpose in spite and pleasure in making a boy cry. The turquoise Thunderbird, she never wanted that car. What she wanted was to prevent them, boys, from having it.

I asked Michael, “What about the car? Who got it?”

“She probably took it with her,” Michael said.

My husband and I laughed, and then we each returned to our reading, to the quiet of the rainy afternoon, and to the quiet of the little disappointments of a relatively happy marriage.

Just you wait.



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