Arts & Humanities

Fiction: "Half of All of What Was True"

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Vivienne Flesher

It was the first hot day of spring. Here in her husband’s world, this Texas trailer park, that couldn’t have meant anything more different than what it had meant back in Romania, back in the mountain village where Rozalia had grown up. But, still, standing in the open door after Rolly had left for work, she felt an augural dryness in

the air, felt her childhood on haying days, that same sense of a new sun holding back. She could almost hear her mother filling the water bottles at the pump, the steady clang of her father in the barn hammering last year’s bends out of the scythe blades.

All morning in the doublewide, she kept the air conditioner off. She liked to work in heat, liked the way it made her muscles feel looser, the movements of her arms more fluid as she wove, the throb of her thigh as she pumped her foot, liked, too, the sweat; there was something more satisfying about finishing a piece with dampness sticking her back to the chair slats, something more done about getting up from the loom to wash the heat off her face with splashes of cold water at the sink.

Maybe it was the heat of the day, or the fact that she had left the lights off and the dim bathroom felt a world removed from the glare of dirt outside, but she found she didn’t want to go back to her work. It was just after noon, a little later than the hour her father would have sent her down from the fields to make their lunch. Her grandfather would be the only one home, the only sound his steady breathing from the pallet where he slept in the dining room. The whole house still. Something delicious, almost sinful, about being at home, alone, in her parents’ house in the middle of the day. In the kitchen, she would saw through the bread, lay out the cold slices of lamb, small moons of radishes. Sometimes, she would call her little brother, send him up to the fields with lunch, wait for the sound of him talking to himself in his high child’s voice to fade into the distance, then slip from the coolness of the kitchen to the coolness of the barn, carrying with her a slice of lamb, bread, a small cup with an illicit taste of her father’s juice, and the tingling thrill of playing hooky. Always, when her father finally came down an hour later, he would be angry. Always, that hour of doing nothing in the cool, dark barn would be worth it.

In the bathroom of the doublewide, she dried her face on the hand towel. It smelled of Rolly. She didn’t like how much she was thinking about the past these days. That’s not the kind of person she had ever been. But when she turned to leave the dimness of the bathroom, there was the bright sun blasting into her workroom down the hall, and the quietness of the trailer all around her, and Rolly, on the other side of town, working all day beneath pipes, and a younger voice than hers speaking to her in Romanian, whispering, as if afraid to wake her grandfather sleeping in the next room.

At the swimming spot, she pulled her car off the flat parking place Rolly had made and into the uncleared mess of sage, feeling foolish secreting it behind a mud bluff. She set the cooler in the car's shade, spread her towel in the sun.

The Rio was brown as puddle water on a dirt road, but the river was cool and the movement of the current made it feel clean. She swam against the drift for a while, first crawl, then breaststroke, then sidestroke, long and powerful, feeling pleasure in how well her muscles worked, how efficient she was — hands cupped just right, legs scissoring, her elbow barely lifting out of the water. She dove under, swam shut-eyed until she felt the bank. At the rope swing, she unlooped the rope from its hook. Even in the hot sun, a breeze shook a shiver from her. Through the entire rushing swoop, she clenched her teeth around a smile, and when the rope reached the end of its arc, she flung herself from it: a high, laughing shout launched into the air, away from her, as she dropped into her own explosion.

Floating on her back, shut eyelids glowing red, the sun hot on her face, she filled her chest with air and rode the river at the speed it took her. As a girl, she had loved swimming, had traveled two hours by bus to compete with the team in Sighetu, had loved chemistry, too, had been the best in her English language class, could have been a translator in Bucharest, in Washington, DC, at the United Nations; could have gotten certified, at least, been an English teacher in her own town, been a Romanian teacher in Cluj or Oradea; could have worked anywhere doing what she did now — London, Paris, Barcelona; had always dreamed of living in an apartment with a rooftop pool, of driving across America in her own car, visiting Chicago, in winter, to see just how bad it was; had wanted to be a doctor, a midwife, to go to a drive-in movie theater, have a membership to a gym, own a laptop computer, a laser printer, her own store. Maybe just a bar. But hers. Children? She had never wanted to be a mother. She had never even, really, wanted to be a wife.

No, that wasn't true. She rolled off her back, straightened up, treaded water. Half of all that wasn't true, she told herself, or at least it wasn't true half of the time. She had not wanted to be a wife the way her mother was a wife: patching the family clothes, churning out feed for the men, a life devoted to the daily running of someone else's things. But that was precisely the peasant woman's world that she had left. To come here. With Rolly. She turned around, looked back at the river throwing its current at her. The rope swing was out of sight. She looked for a landmark she might recognize. Saw none. Not even a glimpse of road. Just the vast dry scrub of Mexico and the endless same on the Texas side. She lay herself into the

current, started a steady crawl. She may not have wanted a husband, but she had wanted Rolly. Which, she reminded herself, was what she had. Her shoulders began to ache. She had only made it a small distance upriver, but she kept at it, elbows lifting lower over the water, hands dragging. She had wanted him more than she had wanted any of the rest. Or, at least, she had wanted him just as much.

Somewhere around the time she reached the curve in the river, she realized that she still did. Deep in her, between the cold flutter of water against her downward belly and the sun rubbing its dry heat into the exposed back of her neck, she felt the fact of it hit. She coughed: water in her lungs, her breath suddenly choppy. She straightened up, treaded long enough to see that the rope- swing pole was still hidden from her. On the shore, the road was a black curve between humps of brown earth. She watched it, the river slowly pushing her backwards despite her treading, and started again, struggling back up to the bend, swimming hard. A sharp pain jabbed her side. She stopped. Rolled onto her back. "*Cacat*," she said to the sky. It took her swear and smothered it in all its limitlessness of blue.

She was wading ashore, still out of sight of the rope swing, when the truck pulled into view: a white SUV, green stripe slashed across its flank, gold insignia, flashers asleep on its roof. It sat there, idling. The man inside sat there, looking at her. She was acutely aware of how little she had on: two pieces of blue swimsuit, wet to near black, and nothing else but her ring. The water sucked at her calves. The SUV's window slid down.

"*Buenas tardes, señora*," the border patrolman called.

He had taken his sunglasses off, and he held them dangling by one ear grip pinched between his teeth.

"Hi," she said. "I speak English. I was only swimming."

His eyes seemed to squint. Even from that distance, she could tell it was more from smiling than from the sun. "That's what they all say," he called, "though I'll give you it's a rare one wears a bikini." He spoke through his teeth, the sunglasses jiggling in time with his words. "You got a vehicle?"

She nodded.

"Where's this vehicle at?"

“Up the road.”

“How far?”

“Not far.”

He seemed to wait for something else, then put his sunglasses back on. “Okay.”

She half-waved a goodbye. The truck sat there, shaking a little under its hood. He was pretending to look for something on the dash. She stepped the rest of the way out of the river. His eyes flicked back to her and slid the distance of her legs.

“You need a ride?” he said.

Around her, the river water dripped: small dark circles like beauty marks on the pale ground.

“Thanks. No.”

“You just gonna sunbathe there on the mud?”

“I can walk.”

His laugh made her feel as if she’d taken a half-dozen steps closer to the truck. “Well, so can I,” he said. “I can cook, too. But I still like to go to a restaurant.”

Walking around the front of the truck, she watched him reach across the seat to pop the door open for her. She stood in the blow of the air conditioner.

“I’ll get your seat soaked,” she said.

While he reached for something in the back, she shifted from one foot to the other, the asphalt burning her feet.

“Stand up here on the runner,” he told her as he spread his jacket out. He did it neatly, folded it so she’d sit on the clean inside instead of the dust, made a perfect square pillow of it, patted it once. “Hop in,” he said.

As they drove, she listened to him talk to her, and tried not to say too much back, and tried even harder not to let herself look at him, and did. He had curly thick hair, so black it was nearly blue, eyebrows just as dark and thick and eyes even darker; they caught hers, held hers, and then let hers go with a glance back at the road. She

looked out her window at the desert whipping by. It was a landscape she had only known with Rolly; she couldn’t imagine it existing without him, just as, after all these years, it was hard to remember how different he’d been without that landscape.



Vivienne Flesher

The patrolman — he’d told her his name, but she had not wanted to remember it — was talking about a restaurant he knew in the city he was from. He smelled faintly of freshly ironed clothes. She could feel the trickles of the river all over her body, icy in the air conditioning; they sent shivers over her belly, her thighs. He reached over and shut the AC off. She gave her smile to the window instead of him. Rolly was the only American she had ever kissed. A strand of wet hair was stuck to her cheek, tickling her lip. She reached up to move it. As soon as she had, she felt his eyes flick to her hand, felt the sudden change in the air inside the truck. For just a second, she wished she had kept her fingers tucked beneath her thigh. As if on their own, her eyes slipped back to his again. But his stayed on the road. She could see him feeling her look. It surprised her how long it took before she let him out from under her gaze. Her body didn’t seem to want to yield the moment to him, even as she grew uneasy, then nervous; she could feel excitement pumping into her chest. She wondered if that was how men felt when they held their stares on women walking by. It had been so long since she’d kissed a man without a mustache that she couldn’t remember what it would feel like, other than completely different.

“That it?” he said.

“Sorry?”

“That your car?”

“Oh.” They were already passing it. “Yes. Yes, that’s —”

He braked, reaching suddenly across her front as they jerked to a stop. She fell forward against his arm. When he pulled his arm back, she could see a dark spot of wetness where her suit top had pressed at his sleeve.

“Sorry,” he said. “Reflex. I got a kid.”

“It’s okay.”

“I’m divorced, but I got a kid.”

He said it coldly. Something about that got to her: the way he’d tried to use his voice like something sprayed between them to cover a scent; the snick of her door unlocking at the insistence of his finger on some button on his side; the way he still wouldn’t look at her, as if she had already done something wrong.

“Would you mind pulling in?” she said. Some explanation about the asphalt burning her feet was on her tongue, but she held it. Instead, she just pointed with a small movement of her hand.

“Down there?”

“If it’s no trouble,” she said.

He drove the SUV down to the edge of the picnic sand. The truck idled on the slant, its nose tilted toward the river. The patrolman pressed his weight on the brake pedal. Gravity pulled her toward the dash. She asked him if he had a cigarette. And watched him squirm under the decision of how to answer. He reached into an armrest cubby, brought out a pack, tapped it, let her pull one.

“Have to open the windows,” he said. “Chief doesn’t like the smell.”

They each slid their window down. The cool air leaked out. The hot air came in. He cupped a match for her. While she drew at it, she watched the sheen on the side of his neck, above his collar, where he was beginning to sweat. They smoked. They

watched the river. His leg was shaking a little from pushing at the brake.

“This place private?” he said. His voice had lost its coolness. She wasn’t sure what had taken over in its place.

She shrugged.

“I mean, is it yours, or the town’s?” He said too fast, “I mean, is it something you made like this?”

“My husband did it,” she said.

He nodded a couple times, as if he had something to add to that. “Maybe we should just finish these,” he said, “and then I’ll be on my way.”

She took a long inhale, blew out, and tossed her cigarette onto the sand. “Instead of what?” she said.

He stared at her. “I don’t feel right about this.”

“What do you have to feel wrong about?”

“You’re another man’s wife.”

“Are you telling me this because you think I don’t know?”

“We aren’t neither of us gonna feel good,” he said. Then added, “Afterwards.”

She knew he meant that he wasn’t going to feel good about it. She knew he meant that she should think about him, about his coming feelings of guilt, what burdens her actions might place on his mind. She worked at the ring on her finger while he talked of the repentance they’d feel, of other men he’d known, buddies on the patrol who had done such things and regretted it after, of the fact that he used to drink and had to be careful not to do things that would drive him back to it. When she got the ring off, she pulled her bikini top out a little and dropped the gold in. It was cool against her skin, a small hard circle weighing at the fabric against the bottom curve of her breast.

“You know,” he said, “the thing is,” and he said, “I have a fiancée,” but he was pulling up on the hand brake, yanking it hard, and turning to her when she leaned across to kiss him.

She missed the mustache. Where there usually was the thick, soft warmth of it nuzzling above her and Rolly's lips, there was just the patrolman's shaved undernose skin smearing its sweat against hers. It was like cuddling in bed without a blanket. She missed the tickle of the hairs and feeling her own smile against Rolly's lips. Plus, the patrolman kept on doing something with his teeth. She tried to use the pressure of her lips to guide him away from whatever biting, nipping, scraping thing he was trying to do, but he wasn't paying attention. She became aware of the fact that his hands weren't touching her. And then that, instead, they were doing something at the level of their laps. At first, she thought he was trying to untie the strings of her bikini, but then she realized that was just his knuckles touching her by accident; he was unbuckling his own belt. She put a hand over his to make it quit.

He stopped trying to bite her long enough to say, against her mouth, "What is it?" and then, before she could answer, "I just need to give it air."

She pushed away from him.

"I just need to get it out," he said. "I wasn't gonna do anything. I just need to give it a little room."

Every time he said that word — need — she felt herself wince. "Tell you what," she said, and tried to rid her mind of hearing Rolly in the phrase she'd picked up from him, "Why don't you just sit there."

His hands were frozen on the zipper of his uniform slacks. "It was just starting to hurt," he told her. "It gets cramped."

The whine in his voice was almost enough to make her get out of the truck right then. It seemed to her that, in some way, always, day after day, she couldn't get away from the pleading, the needing, the wanting her to take care of it and make it better.

"Give me your hand," she said, and told him to stay still as she took it and brought it to herself.

When she was done, she gave the patrolman his hand back. He said something she didn't listen to enough to remember and took out his wallet and a card out of that and offered it to her. His hand was shaking. She took the card, got out, shut the door, and dropped it to the sand. Standing in the full slam of the sun, she fished her

ring out of her bikini top while he stared at her through the window. It took her some time to get the ring back on. When she crossed in front of the truck, he called to her. She turned to him long enough to say, “Now you don’t have anything to feel guilty about.” Then walked away to her car and waited for him to leave.

When he did, she turned and watched the road winding into the distance until she could no longer see even the occasional sun glint of the fast-disappearing truck. In the quiet after, she slowly waded out into the river. By the time she was deep enough to wash between her legs, she was feeling sick. She scooped a handful of gritty mud and stood in the cool water, her swimsuit bottom pulled down around her thighs, scrubbing at the fabric as if she could wear away even the pattern. For a while after, she just stood on the beach Rolly had built, feeling her lower half slowly dry. The sand was strewn with a few empty beer cans from their last picnic. Her car, and the beach towel, and the cooler all looked to her like someone else’s things. For the next half hour, she cleaned the beach of all the leavings of all the picnics they had scattered through the last years, piled the rusted wheel-rim fireplace with beer cans and chip bags and bottle caps and a hundred other things so distorted by the gnaw of time she could no longer even tell what they had once been.

This is an excerpt from a novel in progress.



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