

Wildcat

by Hazelle Palmer

Une femme se remémore sa vie dans un quartier très pauvre d'immigrants. Elle se souvient, plus particulièrement, du jour où son père avait acheté une belle automobile ne se préoccupant guère d'aider sa femme à nourrir ses enfants et à payer le loyer.

I don't think Lilly was supposed to come between them. I think she was supposed to help fill the gap in their relationship that used to hold their dreams.

He named her Lilly because of her colour. She was lily white. Long and sleek. Her front curved in and out like a "W." Every day he would go outside in the "gardens" and polish her, working on her bottom, then her sides, then her top. Pushing, rubbing hard, till the midday sun bounced its radiance off her smooth tin.

It was on one of those days that I first noticed the neighbours standing by. Watching. Their eyes following the movements of his hands as he cleansed her. At first I thought, they, like myself, were fascinated by the attention he gave her. But, as I was to realize later, they really didn't care about that. That was not what brought them to their windows or out of their homes and into the streets. Nor was it because they knew him well or were his friends. No. They did not know anything about this man. Didn't know this was a man who barely remembered his children existed, didn't know when they needed shoes or a new bag to hold their books for school. Didn't know this was a man who gave his wife forty dollars a month ago to pay the rent, to pay the bills, to buy the food to feed his children. Didn't know he hadn't given her anything more since, not money, not conversation, not love.

And what of her? They didn't know her either. Didn't know she sat by her bedroom window every night watching the road, waiting for him to show up, afraid that he wouldn't, then afraid when he did. Because when he did, they didn't know, she couldn't help but ask him where he'd been, knowing full well he'd been with another. She could still smell the perfume, still smell the sex. Didn't know when she got going she could hold her own in an argument, she could bring up all the hurt from the past, stir up all the old, the forgotten. She could remind him of all his dreams that didn't work, all his failures. She could conjure up an image, a mirror of his life so real, it left him trembling.

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No, they had no idea who they were, or what had brought this man and this woman here to their neighbourhood. At first they didn't care. What chains together the people in this neighbourhood is poverty. That's the only common thread. No one has more than the other; no one is better than the other. Until Lilly of course.

The day he brought Lilly home, he rode her down the centre of the street, past the children playing on the road, past the men playing cards, past the women scotched on the brass railings connecting the balconies as they hung out the day's wash, and past her standing behind the lace bedroom curtain, waiting.

When he parked her, he jumped out and held up his hand to his neighbours. They didn't wave back. Instead, they waited until his shadow followed him in the building and up the stairs to his apartment and to her, and then they moved in, surrounding the car, inspecting it closely, confirming its newness, confirming its wealth.

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This neighbourhood was forgotten. Its streets had not been fixed; potholes marked an adventurous yet invisible map from one building to the next. The buildings too were untended and seem to lean sideways from age. Built during World War II to house Canadian soldiers and their families, these homes began sparse—just the bare minimum to provide a roof over heads. No garden space. Instead, concrete playgrounds for children to play and adults to pass summer days. Ironically, over the years it gained the name "the gardens" to protest, I suppose, the fact that it was surrounded by concrete.

Now the people living in these buildings, in this neighbourhood are all fenced in. These fences rolling in and out, framing each building, protecting each concrete playground, and keeping them, the people who live there, apart from others who had drawn a better playing hand at the game of life. They were trapped. Working, but still unable to move on and over the fence to the other side.

Unable to have what some might call necessities and they would call luxuries; unable to buy new toys for their children or new clothes for themselves; unable to buy much of anything new really.

So when he drove that big, new, white car down their street, bobbing and weaving the potholes in his way, when for the first time he raised his hand towards them, it could only have been to make sure they saw him, saw it, recognized its newness, recognized that he had found passage to the other side, beyond the fence.

* * * * *

Listen.

"You think a man can live, day in, day out, just working and not seeing anything for his money. A man needs to see what he's working for. Maybe we can't get a house in this country, but we can have this."

"Everyone wants to better themselves in this life. But we have to use the sense we have to judge whether we can afford to be extravagant."

"What's extravagant? A car!? A car is extravagant in this day and age?"

"Extravagant, perhaps not to a lot of people and it seems not you, but for me and a few others around here, it means choosing between food and a roof over our heads....Imagine, you would go and lease a car when you haven't put money in this house in months. You have money to spend on a car to parade with women and none on your own family."

"And this is not for my own family. This is not for us. Finally we're moving ahead in this country. You're the one that wanted to come here. You had to come. But, I've never caught myself since we came here. I can't find steady work. Can't afford better living than this. For once, in my life I did what I wanted. Something for me. Yes, I admit it, I put me first. I chose to do something for myself. All these years, working, working and ending with nothing. Why did we come to this country if not to better ourselves in this life. Instead, what?? What? Living in a place where people don't even speak to you, working for barely enough money to....I have a right. I have the right to have something of my own in my life. To enjoy what other people consider commonplace and you call extravagant."

"So, if you feel you have accomplished nothing in your life, perhaps you're right, but not for the reasons you say. You like women, they have always run your life. A man like you should be single all his life because you're too selfish, too mean to think of anyone but yourself. So, you're putting yourself first, doing something for yourself?! But it has always been that way for you. How can you look upon your children and think you have accomplished nothing in your life? But they don't count! They are flesh and blood, your flesh, my blood, but they don't count. Maybe things haven't been easy for us since we came here, but you still haven't figured out the reasons why? You have always chosen frivolous things over the things that really count. Setting priorities is something you know nothing about. You think buying a car over buying clothes for our children or putting aside what extra you seem to have towards affording a better place for us to live will solve our problems? It will only create more for us.

You complain about your life here but you take the wrong road to find a better way. Do you think I don't remember the dreams I had to set aside to live my life with you. We came to Canada together...."

"Yeah, but you're the one that really wanted to come here. Not me. By now, I could have been doing well back home; own my shop, maybe. At least I would have had a house by now. The money I used to bring you and those children here I could have bought...."

"Yes, more dreams. If you had stayed, if you had not brought us here, as you put it, you would still be in the same boat now. Because you are not a man who works towards something, who is proud of what he has and builds on it. You envy what others have and go to any lengths to get it for all the wrong reasons. The one dream I will not let go of, not for you, not for anyone, is to see my children survive in this society. I will not rest until they go beyond the barriers that keep me here, in this horrible place. That's my dream, that's what I am working for. It's too late for me but not for them. They are the ones who will reap the benefits of our coming to this country. They will face prejudice and hate because they are coloured, but I will help them to fight that too. They are my future now. They are my dreams. And you, my husband, your future, your dreams are parked outside on the street."

He noticed the scratches first. Some more penetrating than others. All lifting white out of Lilly's coat.

"It was," he told her, "as though someone used a key, no, a nail and just walked from one end of the car to the next. On purpose! You can't have anything in this place before someone wants to destroy it."

She said nothing.

* * * * *

"Sugar or salt, I think," the mechanic said, hoisting his pants back up to his waist.

"Need a new engine in any event. A Buick, Wildcat, eh, a good car. How long ya say ya had it?"

"Haven't had it six months yet."

* * * * *

And so it began. Each new week brought a new problem. Lilly's health was failing despite her age. She was being helped along by neighbours, of course, anxious for her to be drawn to a level they could understand. To look as worn and tired as they felt. They needed no new reminders of the things they could not have; they resented the arrogance of this man to think they would just stand by and watch him taunt them day in, day out.

* * * * *

"The finance man called again. You better call him back, he said he can take legal action if you don't catch up on the car payments."

"What did you tell him?"

"It's not for me to tell him anything. It's your business. It was your choice."

Woman/Man

She sat on the edge of the bed braiding my hair. I played with a red ribbon weaving it through my fingers, waiting for my mother to call for it, to twist it 'round the end of the braid which sat at the top of my head and then to make a bow.

At first we weren't sure we heard an explosion at all. But when we heard him move quickly to the door and heard it slam, we moved swiftly to the window pulling back the curtain to get an uncluttered view of the street below. The smoke had still not cleared and a crowd had gathered, so it was difficult to see. But, after a few minutes, as the smoke cleared, as the crowd moved back, I pulled away from her grasp and sped to the street below. She could see it was Lilly. There wasn't much left of her, a black-brown metal now, her windows and windshield now shattered and scattered across the street, her seats stripped of their insides but miraculously still in place. And then she saw him. Saw him fall to his knees, saw him raise his hands in the air then clutch his head. Then she heard him scream.

Hazelle Palmer is the Managing Editor of Healthsharing, a national health magazine for women. She is working on her first collection of short stories to be published by Sister Vision Press. She lives in Toronto with her partner Alfred and their daughter Ashae.

In the market economy
of relationships
the currency of passion,
love, commitment
giving you the ownership
of my being
from top floor
to the basement
of my deepest emotions.

As my foundations
shook
you put me up
under Power of Sale
You going bankrupt?
Yeah?

Okay
this is the deal
I buy me
with the currency of passion,
love, commitment
I buy me

You in your comfortable
cushy bed
still seething
that I
buy myself back
to hand me over
to new owners

What an illusion
my friend
Do you know?
from top floor to the basement
I was only a pretend house
a pretend property

In real life
I am a wild flower
owned by the soil
water and the warmth of the sun
growing in my own
backyard of wilderness

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