

2-23-2017

Back to Bluefield

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DOI: 10.25148/etd.FIDC001775

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

BACK TO BLUEFIELD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Mary Slebodnik

2017

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Mary Slebodnik, and entitled Back to Bluefield, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Kathleen McCormack

Les Standiford

John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 23, 2017

The thesis of Mary Slebodnik is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2017

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

BACK TO BLUEFIELD

by

Mary Slebodnik

Florida International University, 2017

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

BACK TO BLUEFIELD is a collection of ten short stories set in the fictional small town of Bluefield, Ohio. Like “Dance of the Happy Shades” by Alice Munro, BACK TO BLUEFIELD highlights patriarchal limitations women often face in rural communities. In “This Little Light of Mine,” a teenage girl attempts to escape the sexual abuse inflicted on her by her father, while in “Praise Camp,” a youth pastor counsels a teenager to repress homosexual feelings, yet cannot bury her own unrequited love for her female best friend.

In the spirit of Hemingway’s “The End of Something,” each story contain a high, clear note of grief. In “Lottie’s Winter,” a widow pushes away a new chance at love because of her lasting grief over her husband’s death. Disoriented by profound loss, and limited by Bluefield’s cultural expectations and economic struggles, each character confronts staggering gaps between their realities and their desires.

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Lottie's Winter

Lottie watched the snow fall on Hank's pond. It glittered under the moon. A January deep freeze had sealed it with a thick layer of ice, except for a small hole revealing black water in the center. Likely, Hank had cut the hole to fish. It didn't take long for him to emerge from the pale blue farmhouse next to the pond, across the unnamed county road from Lottie's place. His golden retriever trotted beside him. Lottie couldn't remember its name. Marilyn? Blondie? They both looked warm: Hank's thick flannel jacket (the kind Dan had worn when he planted ginseng) and the dog's yellow fur. Hank carried a pole in one hand and a canvas folding chair in the other. The dog wore a harness with a rolled-up blanket Velcroed to it like a woolly yoga mat.

Hank set up his chair next to the hole in the ice. He unfastened the blanket from the dog's harness and spread it out. The dog ignored the blanket and sniffed around the edge of the exposed water. Hank sat in the chair and pulled a small plastic tackle box out of his jacket pocket. After tying on bait too small for Lottie to see from her perch at her living room window, he tossed the line in the water and waited. Satisfied that the water posed no threats, the dog settled onto the blanket beside Hank. Then they remained still. Hank occasionally pulled on his line to check for activity, and the dog tossed her head when flurries landed on her nose. Lottie imagined joining them down by the water. She imagined settling into her own chair next to Hank and resting her head on his shoulder.

The family clock chimed, startling her out of her fantasies. Midnight marked the third anniversary of Dan's death.

Lottie drew the curtains, sliding the fabric over Hank and his dog.

She would see him the following morning. Hank managed Bluebird Market, the grocery store where Lottie worked.

Lottie paused only once more on her way to the bedroom—stopping to check that the back door was locked, one of the few changes in her nightly routine since Dan died. As her daughter said, an older woman living alone in the country had to be careful (her daughter always said “older” to soften the meaning of “old”). As she turned the handle and felt it stop, the hill loomed through the thin white curtains that covered the back door window. It dwarfed the house. It was where Dan had planted his ginseng.

On her way upstairs, she kept a loose hold on the railing. Even after all these years, the sturdiness and craftsmanship of the wooden staircase impressed her. Dan had known what he was doing when he built the house. After reaching the landing, she went into the bedroom, where the hardwood floor changed to soft carpeting. Lottie had spread a quilt at the foot of their log cabin inspired bed. Their own little den.

She crawled into bed and closed her eyes. Dan had always gone to bed after her. On Friday nights like this one, they had watched old movies, many of them involving flying saucers and poorly costumed monsters. Dan had more discipline than Lottie even in movie watching, staying awake until the credits of every film. Lottie’s eyes would close against her will. Her chin would tilt toward her chest, drooping lower and lower until she shuddered awake.

Eventually, Dan would kiss her on her forehead, down her temple to her ear, waking her up and causing her stomach to swoop even after thirty years of marriage. She would then go to bed without him, but lie awake in the dark until he crawled in beside her an hour later—warm, sturdy. Only then would she relax and fall asleep.

After his death, she had to fall asleep on her own. Her mind wandered until she did. On the anniversary of his death. And every other night, too. She kicked off the covers and turned on her side. Her mind wandered to Hank. She wished he were there.

*

The clock radio twanged out a George Strait tune at five in the morning. Lottie rolled over and found the snooze button. Then she sank back into the mattress and closed her eyes.

She woke up to the radio again a few moments later and turned off the alarm. Her right arm and leg rested on the cool side of the mattress. She avoided thinking “his side.” She had, at least, quit expecting to find him sleeping next to her in the mornings. For the longest time, she had needed to see the fitted sheet stretched tight with no depressions or wrinkles before she remembered.

A voice in her mind yelled at her body to get up. But Lottie did not want to get up. She tried to provoke herself into rising by thinking of her obligations. Her employees needed her. The customers needed her. Her daughter, although long-gone to Arizona, needed her to carry on living in some way or another.

For that matter, Hank needed her—as store manager. She closed her eyes again and did not want to get up. Her wish for Hank the previous night shamed her. She saw herself as a grieving old woman, wanting a tonic to make the pain go away.

Dan had never missed work, even when he was sick. That’s how everyone had known something was wrong that day, three years ago. He didn’t show up to work because he had had a heart attack on the hill behind the house. Lottie was at the bakery by then, pushing donuts into the oven. When they called her, he was already dead.

To avoid falling into a pit of remembering, she twisted free of the covers and didn't bother selecting clothes on her way to the bathroom. She flipped on a light and, still shielding her eyes, plunged herself under the too cold flow of the showerhead.

After her shower, the morning went a little better. She counted her victory over the gravitational pull of her mattress a success. Sometimes she skipped parts of her washing regimen because she felt tired, but this morning, she managed to complete the whole routine, including rinsing her mouth with Listerine. By the time she reached the kitchen, she felt ambitious enough to turn on the coffee pot. When she realized she had run out of sugar, she added more cream and vanilla. She liked the taste better than she expected, and made a plan for her future: make coffee like this tomorrow.

Her stillness as she sipped her coffee resonated with the stillness of the house. Besides her sips, the refrigerator's hum produced the only audible sound. Sometimes, if Lottie could make it to work or another public place early in the day, her mood wouldn't crash until the evening when she returned home. As long as there were witnesses, she felt safe. She wouldn't crash with people watching.

She pulled on her blue polo, tied on an apron, and drove to work.

*

Bluebird Market, a small, square box of a building with blue siding and a cartoon blue jay pasted on the marquee announcing, "Gallon 2% Milk 1.99," sat across from the Circle K and the Family Drug Store at the edge of town. She pulled in just five minutes past six and decided to count herself as on-time. She unlocked the side door by the dumpster to let herself in.

There was so much to do before the store opened at eight, and so little had been done the night before. The wire basket for frying chicken, with breading and grease still clinging to it, smelled like old frying oil and sat in the sink, jammed in with the other unwashed dishes. When Lottie walked out to the sales counter, she noted that the plastic bowls in the deli case contained fresh dollops of potato and ham salad, but the stiffened sauce around the edges of the bowls showed night shift's decision not to wash them. Lottie checked the schedule taped to the wall to remind herself of whom she had chosen to close the evening before.

Katie. Lottie had hired Katie, a student at Bluefield Community College, at the start of the summer. Katie didn't take the job seriously. Lottie had caught Katie making fun of her to Ellen, a longtime deli worker Lottie considered a friend. Katie had bustled behind the counter to-and-fro in front of Ellen, pretending to fret because she had given a customer the wrong brand of turkey. Lottie had recognized herself immediately when Katie pressed her palm to her chest.

Ellen had come to Lottie's defense. Sort of.

"Well, it makes sense she's crazy about details like that," Ellen said. "She hasn't got anything else in her life to worry about."

"She should take a class or something," Katie said. "BCC offers them to seniors for free."

Katie was young and Lottie could forgive her belief that a class would fill the void left by her late husband and out-of-state daughter. It was Ellen she had struggled to resume a friendship with since that day. It was Ellen she argued against in her mind after work, trying either to prove that she had more worthwhile worries in her life besides a