

A Country of Husbands

by Debbie Ann Ice

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The first husband was young and lovely. He had a little nose and long fingers he used for things like planting begonias in my clay pot. I did not do flowers. So that was nice. He talked in phrases, fast clips of facts, and he worked all day and all night.

We lived in a house on the edge of the country, where the water slapped a coast that looked cut off from the ocean with a serrated knife. Our neighborhood was all scattered vegetation-- tangled green surrounding brick, rock, wood and mortar. The neighbors were loud, but the tangled green muffled the sound, so we felt but did not hear everyone. Our house had shuttered windows and a bouncy screened door that shouted when I left or returned. I did not leave much, and when I did, I returned right away, pulling the screen door open, then pausing to listen to my house's shout.

We had wars over trivial, itty-bitty things. The itty-bitty things were broken off of one large, significant thing—my abhorrence for cleaning. Cleaning was an activity which involved a back and forth monotony that I found degrading and in risk of disrupting a delicate neurological balance that could eventually lead to insanity. So I stopped. This refusal to engage in normal household ablution led to the itty-bitty things-- dust, paper, bits of food, and so on. Wars are

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fought with battles; battles are tiring; on the edge nothing matters, so why bother. I left.

The second husband had a flat nose, average fingers with half moon nails, and a body that was round and not worth discussing. He took me to the middle, which literally and figuratively resembled his nose. The world looked smashed into the ground. Trees had either all been cut down, or never planted, or perhaps yanked away by wind funnels that, apparently, according to the second husband, fell from the sky with no warning. There would be rain, a few bangs of ice upon the head, then bam-- houses, trees, cars, babies sucked up and away.

We lived in a house in a neighborhood where all houses looked like siblings in a large house family. From a distance, the neighborhood resembled monopoly houses tossed from an airplane. I imagined them tumbling through the air, expanding in size as they fell. Then, plop: houses on grass, near a hot street.

There were no itty-bitty battles. I did not clean, so the second husband cleaned. I complained, and he would sigh then agree, and that would be that.

No one seemed to care that nothing grew up toward the sky. What mattered was only us, stuck to the earth, in full view of each other. Any change in weather, a pick up in wind, a thickening of clouds, anything that suggested something may reach down towards us, frightened everyone.

But it thrilled me.

I loved when the air turned wet and kinetic, when the wind brought in fat, dusty cumulous formations that rose up like nuclear explosions. I wanted a funnel to drop upon my head.

After a year, I walked outside on cloudless days, across the strip of road, onto the farmland, green and lumpy under the heavy sun. I raised my hands, clasped together like a steeple, and swayed at the slightest puff of wind. I tried to feel it-- blue air touching verdant leaves. I imagined spreading out, one branch, one twig, at a time,

until I muffled all noise with my thick self. I did this every day. Neighbors talked about me in huddles, their worry emerging in susurrations. The second husband asked me what he could do, how he could help. Doctors visited me. Therapists came to me out in the field, their hands up in imitation, trying to find what it was I wanted.

I wanted a tree. So I left.

The third husband's nose was overshadowed by large cheekbones, held up by round eyes. His hands were rough with hair like Brillo pads, and his body grew up and out like a granite chalice. He let his words blend together to form other words that could not be found in dictionaries. He moved me thousands of miles south of the line that at one time separated our country into different kinds of hate. We were so far away from this line, there were old people who still thought the line was a border to another country.

I lived on the edge again, but this one slipped into the ocean gradually, the land going through a metamorphosis of sorts-- hot and grainy to crunchy and egg shelly, to soft, to mushed-up with life and happy to be hidden. When I looked out beyond the water I saw nothing but more water and heat rising up in the distance, heavy, alive and as shaky as the old people.

My third husband and I fought over itty-bitty things, but everyone fought over itty-bitty things. I didn't clean, so we hired a maid who said she would do it only if our house were exorcized. I allowed her to bring in an old, red-eyed minister, and they chanted while my neighbor and I drank beer.

My third husband slept with my neighbor, so I slept with another neighbor. He switched neighbors. I switched neighbors. After a while it got old, so we giggled, drank and forgave each other. Eventually my husband faded. I started hanging out with other women who taught me how to connect to a man like a vine to a trellis. You grow up and away then fall around the edges, just so.

Even though I rarely know where my third husband is, I will never leave, because I don't care. And I do not want a fourth husband who will take me way across the land to a place where everyone wears sunglasses, low-cut shirts and speak in dreams. I turn on the TV to see that place, and that is all I care to know about it.

