

The Cougar

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

I notice the salad before I see Alan. A tumble of baby greens, the drizzle of vinaigrette glistens like dew drops on grass. One of those small salads that barely feeds a child much less a man. His face looks leaner now, a wolf's not a bear's. He looks hungry.

I pull out my compact — lips on, makeup not melted, no raccoon circles under my eyes. No lunch leftovers hanging from my teeth. I click the mirror shut with satisfaction. Thank goddess he can't see me, the column wrapped in plastic ivy blocks his view but not mine. He tucks in close to the table, his stomach not drooping between his thighs, his chest no longer sagging over his plate. A cold sweat breaks out between my breasts.

The waiter deposits another basket of warm rolls, the little balls of butter in the white dish melting. I tear apart a roll and steam rises, the dough soft and yeasty in my mouth. Carrie is late, but when she struts through the restaurant, bright as a peacock, my ex will follow her to me. He never liked her, thought her a hussy, though he couldn't keep his eyes off of her at our last tree trimming party.

Beyond a few necessary email exchanges — who gets the Dodge, the silver, the cat - Alan and I haven't spoken since last April, not since we passed papers. I had stared at his girth, the damp stain spreading under his armpits. Even across the table, he smelled sour, fetid, like cabbage rotting. Our marriage decomposing. Then, he had only lost 30 pounds, the gastric bypass slow to take. Twenty-six years, he said, his eyes puppy-dog sad. How can you throw that away? The children? The house? Our marriage?

Marriage? The children grown and moved away, the house a dust-filled monstrosity, a weekly roll with me on top, always on top, so he would not crush me. For twenty five of those years I had counted until our youngest finished college. The day after she graduated I handed him my intent to divorce.

After the lawyers shook hands, I bolted to *Julian's*, Carrie already tipsy on two-buck highballs and the Led Zeppelin streaming through the speakers. My partner in crime had prowled the singles scene for over a year, ever since she left Dan. *Julian's* was our watering hole of choice, cheap drinks, music we can sing to, a plentiful stable of men. We stumbled off our stools and played billiards with a group of IBMers passing through town. They slung back microbrews while we drank sloe gin fizzes so sweet they made my teeth ache. We slow danced in the hazy smoke, kissed pressed against the pool table.

Later, the slow undressing in my new apartment. Carrie demonstrated her pole dance classes on her pick-up. I lap-danced mine on the single chair, a Lazy-boy recliner from Salvation Army. My first legal, non-adulterous fuck. How freeing to writhe under someone with more muscles than fat, who could keep it up longer than a minute, who afterwards stroked my hair and if he noticed the fine silver strands by my ears didn't mention them. I forget his name, only remember he was a good Jewish boy and how we talked how difficult it was to maintain faith in a secular world. He caressed the silver chalice hanging below my neck and then he did me again, his mouth burrowed in my breasts, murmuring what sounded like mama-mama-mama as he went limp in me.

I lean over the table for a better view. Alan picks at a radish. There is no bread basket at his table. No wine. He sips from a glass, a lemon round floating atop a raft of ice cubes. He shifts in his seat and I marvel at newly-defined deltoids. A small ache slides under my breast bone. Someone told me, maybe Carrie, that she'd seen him at Gold's lifting weights. Wrong! I'd said. You are so wrong! He never lifted a can of peas much less broke a sweat over a biceps curl. Her lips arranged into that all-knowing Mona Lisa smile of hers, but I knew she was mistaken.

I tease apart another roll. *Liberatore's* is dangerous for South Beachers. This used to be our restaurant, our Friday night date. The music's too loud now and, other than the bread basket, the portions skimpier. Alan raises a baby green to his mouth. He chews and

chews, forever it seems. His hair shines, longer down the neck, the ears, the grey gone. A small hand with nails the color of my lipstick reaches across the linen table and pats his forearm. He lowers his fork beside the salad and the pink moons disappear in his massive hand.

Jealousy slithers through me. I crane my neck to see who is attached to the end of those long fine fingers but a stupid waiter in his stupid black jacket stands between us, unloading plates of pasta. The hand withdraws. The roll drops from my fingers and bounces off my lap and onto the floor.

“Girlfriend!”

Carrie looks down at me, lips glossy, blond hair pulled off her high forehead. Turquoise silk wafts over her boobs, slides over her hips. She pulls me into her hug, a haze of *Tabu*, her pink, pink nails splaying around my shoulder.

