

After Work

by Mark Manselle

"I was thinking about the other night." He said from the living room.

She could hear his work boots scrape and creak across the old wood floors, and the sound of his weight landing on the couch, then the snap of the lighter as he lit the pipe and inhaled deeply. It made her smile and shake her head. Since they were twenty, she'd heard these familiar sounds.

She looked down at the coffee pot in her hands and used her wrist to turn on the water to rinse it. In her mind she was counting, nodding her head as she did it. One. Two. Three. Four...

He exhaled loudly in the other room.

Wait for it, she thought, still smiling.

The double cough. Boom, boom. Then the big smile coming out in his voice.

"You ready?" He asked.

"Just a sec, I'm finishing up." She said. And pulled the plug in the sink. Wiping her hands on a towel and feeling the smile on her face. Watching the sudsy water begin to turn in the sink, and go down.

She threw the towel over her shoulder and stepped out to the living room. He was sitting in his spot on the end of the couch, holding the pipe out to her.

He said, "I was thinking about what the kid's said the other night."

She watched him, waiting for her response, impatient while she held the smoke in her lungs. She nodded at him to go on.

"Well, what'd you think?" He asked.

She exhaled, and then brought her hand up to her mouth to wave off a cough of her own as she spoke. "I don't know, they asked you."

"Asked me? They weren't asking me, they were informing me. They said they talked to you about it before they told me anything. I didn't know what to say, I was in shock."

She laughed.

"What?" He barked.

"You. You're mad."

"No," He said, and lowered his voice. "I'm not." He looked at the dark television screen, thinking about it.

She loved the flecks of gray in his hair. It worried him, made him feel old, he had told her. But she thought it looked distinguished on him, grown up and mature. And it made her feel good, to witness these small changes. As if they had somehow weathered the storm of their youth together, and sailed now, on calmer seas.

"A part of me is, happy, I guess." He said. "I'm worried for them, I don't think they have any idea what they're in for. But, I'm excited, too. I don't know, what do you think?"

She handed him the pipe and turned back to the kitchen, she took the towel off her shoulder and draped it over the oven handle. She could hear him lighting the pipe again. She lit a cigarette.

He coughed. Twice.

"I think they'll be fine." She said, walking back out to the living room. She sat down in her spot, across from him in the recliner chair.

"Yeah." He said. And set the pipe down on the coffee table. He looked at her and smiled.

"What?"

He shrugged his big broad shoulders. His grin, especially when he smoked, was infectious.

"What?" She repeated.

He sat back and looked at her. Smiling. She searched his mischievous eyes, waiting for what he would say.

"Are you sure you're ready to be called Grandma?" He asked, both of his eyebrows up on his forehead, still smiling.

She laughed.

