

HUSBANDS

by Katherine Frank

The man that she wants to marry, she told me one night, has dark hair and dark eyes. He wears glasses and khaki pants and probably is a writer. She can see him, she said, on a Saturday afternoon playing basketball with the kids in the driveway. She is looking at them from inside the house, peering out through a window. He is letting the two little girls win, pretending to shoot and miss. She loves him, or the thought of him. I want that basketball court, she says.

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Sarah is late; she is always late but she is so beautiful when she comes through the door that I forgive her once again. Her hair is loose, curly, and the businessmen at the table near the window look up from their plates. She rarely wears her hair loose because of the attention that it attracts; today, I know that she has done it for me. She moves her hands to the front of her flowered dress and then down to her sides. She smiles at me, looking embarrassed.

I'm sorry, she says, setting her purse on the floor and gathering her dress as she slides into the booth.

Don't worry, I answer, it doesn't matter. I glance at the men, different shades of pinstripes and blue, who are going back to their meals.

We order salads and wine, even though it is lunch. It is awkward, at first, and I am not sure quite what to say. The restaurant is breezy and cool in the way that only indoor spaces can be in Atlanta during the summer, and the room is inundated with giant-leafed plants. I drink my wine, listening to her talk about her new apartment, the tile that she needs to put in the bathroom over the weekend. I am trying to keep from smiling, trying to look like I am listening to what she is saying instead of remembering how it felt to kiss her in my car in front of that new apartment last night, how it felt to have her hands in my hair, on my legs. Remembering the headlights coming up behind us, how we both jumped apart, laughing, wondering if they could see us, and what they would say if they had.

We had laughed, but she had been worried, and I could tell by the way that she deftly drew back to her side of the car, collecting her things around her, erecting boundaries out of mere space, out of habit.

Our salads arrive with no cheese, low-fat dressing on the side.

Do you feel the need to clarify anything? Sarah asks finally, nervously.

I take a moment to answer. I don't think so, I say, I feel fine.

She leans back against the booth, resting her head on the leather. I have to say that there is something strangely liberating about this, she says, smiling.

Really? I say.

I walk down the street, she says, and I think to myself, this is how a lesbian walks.

Does a lesbian walk different, I ask, than you did before?

She walks with a kind of surprise, she says as she runs a hand through her hair. A lesbian, she says, walks knowing things that no one else knows. She laughs.

I walk knowing things that men know. I know, now, how it is to want a woman. How forceful, how overtaking it can be.

Sarah is happy about this. And I know that she is wrong because I walk knowing things that men know. I know, now, how it is to want a woman. How forceful, how overtaking it can be. And I am so afraid, Sarah, I think, as I watch her pick the tomatoes out of her salad, that you are going to go back to him and leave me with this desire that I have not even really figured out myself.

Almost as if she has heard my thought, she looks up. This has been a long time in coming, she says, I always knew I might end up with a woman, and now I can tell Michael why I am leaving him.

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The phone rings finally and I feel as if I have been waiting for hours. I am pacing, stepping back and forth over my sleeping orange cat. Where were you? I ask.

Her voice is soft, and there is a bit of static on the line. I was with Michael, she says. We went to see a movie.

I thought that we were going to do something, I say, realizing that my voice sounds accusatory.

I'm home now, she says softly. I can come over if you want.

I look around my apartment and it is a mess because I have been so angry. My paints are everywhere. There are jeans drying on the table, nylons hanging over the rod in the bathroom. My hair is in a sloppy ponytail.

In my mind I see her kissing Michael goodnight and I feel sick and guilty, as if I have been hiding in the shadows.

No, I say, I am really tired now. I think I just need to get to bed.

Are you sure? she asks, and I tell her yes. She does not ask me to come to her new place, and I know that I cannot be mad because she is still trying to excise and arrange the parts of Michael that are sticking to her, trying desperately to create her own space out of what she has left.

As I put down the phone, I wonder how many times she has seen me with my hair in a ponytail, how many times she has seen my apartment in greater disarray than it is now. She has seen me in my purple facial mask, in my glasses, when I broke my leg and cried in the spring. But now, I am suddenly uncomfortable with those things.

Sarah knows those things that men do not because she was a friend first—she knows that I color my hair, that I hate my feet because they are too big and bony, that I talk in my sleep. Those are things that men find out later. You color your hair? a boyfriend asked me once after a year. It was longer than that before he saw my feet in the daylight.

One rule I have for staying happily married, my mother told me when I was younger, is to never let him see you go to the bathroom. Too much intimacy is too much and some people just do not realize it.

But now, with Sarah, all of that interior space is already gone. How many times have Sarah and I shared a bathroom somewhere? How many times have I heard her talk about sex with Michael? How many secrets do our bodies have?

Oh, but her body has its secrets, I think. I don't know half of those secrets yet.

And it is strange, this, in a sudden, blinding way.

There is a husband that I want, too. I can even picture him—tall and blonde, smart and quick. I see myself, sometimes, reading on the couch while the kids are watching television and he is working late at his desk. I look up from my book, realize that it is late, and tell the kids that it's time to get ready for bed. Before taking

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I just don't know what I am supposed to do.**

the kids upstairs to sleep, I watch as their father kisses them goodnight from his desk chair. He is wearing glasses and pajama bottoms. The scene unfolds like an old reel movie in my mind, crackly and disjointed, dotted with time and wear.

I want that sometimes, too.

Sarah likes to see me with men. She is standing off to the side and I am dancing, wearing one of the little flowery dresses that I always wear, with heels, and the men are coming around like they always do. They dance behind you sometimes, pretending that they are fucking you, and I pretend that I do not notice them, that I am just dancing.

Tonight, though, I am dancing a bit harder, pretending a bit more that the men behind me are not pretending to fuck me. I am looking a bit distant, the way that she likes, and dancing a bit more suggestively so that there will be more men around, all because she spent the day with Michael again. I do not want to wonder what they talked about, if she kissed him, if she slept with him. I am not supposed to ask, so I have been drinking a few too many beers. It seems strange that we used to spend hours talking about the men in our lives, and now their names are part of the barely-said.

You're gorgeous, a man says to me. I've been watching you all night.

I smile at him. Thank you.

Are you ready for a beer? another man asks me. I nod yes, and send Sarah a glance to let her know that I am going to the bar. She smiles.

But this is the easy part, I cannot help thinking as I work my way through the crowd with my arm in his. This man, I know how to touch him, I know how he would touch me. The script is there, and we have already begun reading it by our very walking together. There is no other way for it to be, not here, anyway.

But later, in the parking lot beside my house, with the streetlight above making Sarah and I dark and tall on the pavement, tangled arms and legs and smoky hair. Not knowing who is to touch and who is to be touched because those things have not yet been written, have not yet been spoken by us.

We stop before articulating them, aware of the public space. She steps away and instantly there is air all around me, cool and invasive, on my skin.

Maybe I am straight, I think to myself. I just don't know what I am supposed to do.

You're so cute, I say finally, looking at her damp curls, the small, beautiful scar on her cheek.

I hate that word, she says.

Why? I ask. I am leaning against the car, aware that I have had too much alcohol.

I just do.

I turn to leave, to walk into my apartment, and she opens her car door.

Gorgeous, then, I say loudly. She laughs.

Wonderful, I say louder. Sexy, I call and pull my skirt up to show more of my thigh. I press my breasts together like a campy Cosmo girl. She shakes her head slowly.

Suddenly, I do not care if the whole neighborhood hears. You're beautiful, I call to her, you are. She gets into her car and shuts the door. I can see her sitting behind the wheel, looking at me. I want you, I yell, laughing, knowing that she is scared that someone will hear, that she is mad now that I am being so obvious.

But I am mad, too. I do not want to be her liberator, her experiment, her secret.

The engine starts, and a light goes on in the house across the street.

I do want you, I call again, not sure that she can hear me.

I watch her taillights as she drives away.

My neighbor looks at me, sleepy-eyed, from his porch.

It comes in waves, my wanting you, she says.

What does that mean?



USBANDS, ctd.

It means that I am not sure now, not sure what to call myself, not sure what I am.

But why do we have to call ourselves anything? Can't we just leave it unnamed?

But it isn't unnamed, it's something that is named every day, irrevocably, forcefully. It is something asked of you in every motion, every action. When I walk, I say to myself, I must walk the way a lesbian walks. Sometimes I am proud, and I want people to be able to see it in my stride. But I'm not sure, I'm not sure if I'm a lesbian. Am I a bisexual? But how do you know? I see you and I see Michael and I'm not sure where I belong. And I think I might want to still have sex with men. I think I want to marry a man, don't you? I don't know why. I just don't know anything yet.

I don't know, either.

I just know that it comes in waves.

Waves.

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We are sitting on my front porch in the late afternoon, trying to be still in the heat. The ceiling fans slowly whirring overhead. Sarah is leaning against my legs, playing with the cat, who adores her. I am painting the distant Atlanta skyline, badly, every so often becoming distracted by the feel of her hair on my leg.

I'm too content to be a good painter, I say. She smiles, rubbing her hand along the cat's belly. If we end up living together, I say, I'll never get any work done.

You'd have a studio, she says.

Maybe a studio in the backyard, I say.

And you'll decorate the house, she answers, because you know that I'm not good with colors.

You'll do all the cooking, right? I say, and be the one to pay the bills because I always forget?

My hand is tangling itself in her hair, tracing the leafy shadows from the trees on her bare shoulders.

Of course, she says, and you can dress our child in the morning in those frilly Laura Ashley clothes that you love so much.

I laugh. What if it's a boy?

Even so, she says.

Sarah sits up suddenly, and my hand falls to my lap. On the sidewalk in front of the porch an old man is walking his little dog. He waves at us, the little dog pees on a bush, and they continue down the street. I see her relax as he turns the corner.

I'm just always afraid it will be someone we know, she says, maybe Michael even.

She wants to explain. I begin to paint again, a messy Atlanta. Stop painting like that, she says. Please don't be mad.

I'm not mad, I say.

Sarah reaches over and takes the paintbrush from my hand and I think that she might lean over to kiss me but instead she dips the thin brush into the red paint and begins to draw on my leg. The wet bristles on my skin feel dangerously erotic, and I

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watch as she paints a square house with a roof on my calf. I have nowhere to put my hands and deprived of the brush they feel peculiar and conspicuous so I grip the armrest. She puts a red sun near my knee, and then prepares the metallic green paint. It tickles, I say as she paints a tree by the house and a steel green cat by the tree.

I've always wanted a tattoo, she says, put I've been scared to actually go do it.

I'd go with you, I say.

It is painful, she says, or at least that is what I've been told.

To my leg she adds a fence, and a stick horse in a field.

In a heavy gray blue, she draws clouds on my legs, and flying birds that look like letters.

To the side of the house, two people. No husbands.

She kisses my ankle.

I look away, off over towards the skyline, but I feel her hand reaching up under my dress. The sun is hot and although I command it not to, my body responds.

And the tattoo is already melting from the sweat on my leg; the colors are streaming into one another, red and green and blue forming murky black, new and different rivers, until those images that haunt us are no longer recognizable. ○○



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