

VALERIE MACEWAN

REUNION SUMMER

I. TEXARKANA

GREAT UNCLE PETE is the first one to reach the pinnacle of inebriation. As one side of his lawn chair sinks slowly into the mud, his body oozes, unnoticed, onto the ground near the campfire. While reciting an oft-repeated tale of the battle of Midway, he crawls through the mud to Uncle Edmond's chair, uses it for support, rights himself and then picks up his chair and puts it back in the same spot. Never missing a beat, never stopping the dialogue. He continues this oozing process throughout the night. His war stories mingle with those of deer hunting, stock markets, and country club peccadilloes. He pauses often to propose a toast to his sister Sophia, confined in a nursing home some fifty miles south of the deer camp by a diminishing brain and a rapidly deteriorating body.

A group of twenty-three adults — all at various levels of drunkenness ranging from mere intoxication to complete stupor — sit around the large fire and keep it burning by feeding it pine branches and paper plates filled with chicken bones and small mounds of potato salad. Some, teenagers at the last reunion, join the circle for the first time.

Children run through the dark forest surrounding the camp. The woods reverberate with the high-pitched screams and squeals of the young who have no supervision and realize it.

Sparks from the fire light up the night above the family and reflect in

the children's faces as they come just within earshot of the grownups and pause to listen, to see if it is still true. And it is. No one is paying attention to them. Excited out of any chance of sleep, they stay in the woods all night long. The children solve their own conflicts, smacking and threatening the transgressors into silence. They mete out juvenile justice in a quiet way designed to keep the grownups out of the dark forest, out of the way. Hissing words — they'll hear you...shut up...okay you can have it, just be quiet...don't tell Mom...it's not bleeding, you'll be okay...I'll give you my Mars bar...shut up...shut up you baby. Don't tell...

The sun at dawn is a TV in a dark room when there's no other light but the glow of the screen. Nothing but a thin stream of smoke and the smell of burning food remains of the fire. Surreal colors reflect off the exhausted children's faces as they begin to surrender to the day. Creeping into the fire circle one by one, they gently place their hands on parent's arms or shoulders, reminding adults of responsibility. Of the frailness, the smallness, of seven and ten year olds.

Parents rise, shaken into sobriety. Grasping their offspring to their chests like grocery bags, they carry the children inside and drop them with loud thuds onto pallets made of hundred year old quilts and wool blankets. The rest of the adults slowly realize the anonymity of darkness is fading and the liquor bottles are empty. Glass bottles and beer cans impede their progress as they wend their way toward the cabin. They crawl in between the quilt-covered mounds, claiming their own territory, and promptly pass out.

It's almost noon as one by one the children wake. They creep silently, single file, out the door and settle at the picnic table on the screened in porch. They've slept in their clothes. Covered with mud and smelling of the humid Arkansas mid-July sun, they are too exhausted to pick fights. Aunt Louise helps them refresh their batteries with huge tumblers of orange juice, mounds of pancakes heavily laced with syrup, and the promise of another ride on Great Uncle Pete's ATV if they will just stay quiet until Larry Wayne wakes up and has his coffee.

II. HIGH SCHOOL

MEMBERS OF THE CLASS OF 1972 step out of the elevator into the lobby of the ballroom on the top floor of the Holiday Inn on Lake Hamilton. Heading straight for the cash bar, they enter the room glancing side to side for a familiar face. Relieved, they quickly realize it's the same crowd they see every Saturday night at the Sawmill. There are no unrecognizable faces. None. Few people

leave this town; and if they do, they don't return.

Women, drunk with the excitement of two nights in a row away from their toddlers, add to their inebriation with ice-cold beer. They grasp their Koozies, talk about potty training and tell themselves they are not getting up at five a.m. with the baby. It's Daddy's turn. This is their night out. They all share the same misconception that their husbands will stumble out of bed the next morning and whisper to them to go back to sleep.

Their husbands stand together in circles of four or five, slapping each other on the back as they reminisce about the State Championship game and getting puking drunk on the bus ride back to town. Good old Coach Carter, they don't make them like that any more. Bobby suggests getting together to play touch football on Saturdays, but they all know it won't happen. Their wives control the weekend, doling out short bursts of freedom after yards are mowed, cars washed, and trips are made to Wal-Mart.

Ed daydreams about porking the fourteen-year-old baby sitter, pulling over in Groveland Park while taking her home. Making it with her in the back seat. Then he realizes the fourteen-year-old is Bobby's little sister. It takes him a moment to convince himself it would be wrong.

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The women's conversation lags until Denise begins to describe her recent yeast infection. Peals of laughter erupt from the group as she does her "round brush" routine. Two men at the bar shift their line of vision to see who's causing the laughter. One says to the other, "Ed's never been able to shut her up, but she's got fantastic tits." A nod of agreement.

"Yeah, and she gave great blow jobs behind the bleachers during study hall." Both men sigh.

Julie finishes her third beer and looks around at the women. They all still laugh at Denise's joke. Gary told her how nice everyone would be and she just can't believe he was right. She's never really had any women friends. He told her she would fit right in. Basking in the glow of complete attention from her audience, she reveals their plans to build a

new lake house. She tells them she just has to get Gary out of that big old ugly house, the one that was his grandmother's, down on Quapaw Avenue.

Gary's recent marriage to Julie was the hottest topic of discussion at Diaper Gymnastics classes last week. Most of the town's useful information is disseminated as mothers carefully hold their toddler's hands, guiding them across wide balance beams in the YMCA gymnasium.

Rhonda's cousin, Lisa, works at the Pulaski County courthouse and files the marriage licenses. Lisa deemed the marriage information a top priority and, knowing it was Diaper Gymnastics day, called the office of the "Y" to tell Rhonda. This marriage will affect everyone. Gary is their pediatrician, and his father, their OB-GYN. Information like this should be held close to the chest.

Julie grew up in Piggot and graduated ten years later than they did. Rumor has it she flunked ninth grade because she missed the last three months of school. The rest of the story, if it is to be believed, is that she went to her aunt's in Little Rock to have a baby. But she's not from here, and none of them know anyone in Piggot, so they can't be sure.

Not knowing they'd been outted, the couple thinks they announced the marriage the night before at the Reunion Dinner. Gary swore them to all to secrecy. Said he would make it public once his parents got to know Julie, accepted her into the family as his "girlfriend." Then he'd work on "wife."

ON THE DRIVE HOME THAT NIGHT, wives remarked to their husbands that it would be a cold day in hell before Gary's mother could stand to hear that kind of news. Most husbands responded with a comment about nothing being a secret in this town for long anyway. So what did it matter. Ed made the mistake of commenting that he thought Julie was nice.

Interrupting the discussion of the cost of lakefront property, Rhonda taps Denise's arm, says, "let's go to the bathroom." Denise knows this signal. She and Rhonda have been inseparable since third grade. Their fathers were law partners, their mothers best friends, and they grew up in the same neighborhood. Once in the bathroom, they check under the stalls to make sure they're alone.

"God knows she is trash. I can't believe he married her. And she's stupid. That's the really sad part. Not a brain cell anywhere."

"I know, I know. Listen...remember me telling you how Mama saw her in the Pig last winter? She recognized her from that Miss January photo on Wayne O's Snap-On calendar down at the shop. Mama said Julie was in the grocery store, wearing a mink coat and flip-flops...and some kind of lime green stretch pants. Talking to the bag boy, you know, Artie's little brother... they were whispering about something. Mama said their faces were less than three inches apart. Julie looked real mad. When Artie's brother grabbed Julie's shoulder, she smacked his hand. Then she hissed something like, 'Don't call me anymore. Stay away from me you creep. It's over.' Remember Artie saying his brother went to live in Phoenix with his granddad? Maybe that's why. I never thought much about it, I never thought she'd marry Gary."

"I remember. Watch the door... Bobby gave me a joint. I got some matches from the bar. I'm going to want a cigarette too. Do you have any change? There's a machine in the lobby downstairs. Ahhhh... Here, have some."

"Thanks. Someone's coming in, take it in a stall...Hey. Hi. It's okay, Rhonda. It's just Ellen. Bobby gave Rhonda a joint. Want some?"

III. THE COUNTRY CLUB FAMILY

ONLY A FEW PEOPLE sit in the brocade chairs surrounding the white linen covered tables at the Brentwood Country Club ballroom. They are the elderly, and with canes leaning against the empty seats, they talk in low voices, occasionally cupping their ears to hear each other. A tight group of almost middle-aged men stand near the bar in the far corner. Facing the room, backs to the bar, they survey the room. On the stage a small band plays low-volume show tunes.

Children dressed in their finest, most uncomfortable clothes race around the room. They are on the verge of rioting. Confined to a large space containing no diversion other than themselves, they push each other aside as they race around tables and head toward the dessert buffet. Linen-suited demon boys flick boogers at their sisters.

Small clusters of women form cliques throughout the room. Standing amid despised cousins and whining grown siblings, they are quickly bored with the conversations. They hurry to bridge the gap between themselves and their buffet-bound offspring. Gently clapping their hands, they whisper admonishments and beg for proper behavior. "Don't make me get your father... Remember what he told you in the

car?" "Be still for a minute." "You need to be unseen and unheard." "What will your Papaw think?"

The children, wise to their mothers' shaky positions, negotiate for sleepovers and ice cream in exchange for acceptable behavior. Promise to quiet down as they crawl under tables while sliding from their mother's grip.

The men continue to hover near the bar, never allowing more than a few feet between them and the bartender. They drink hundred-year-old scotch and review yesterday's market decline. They ignore everyone in the room except Great-Uncle Pete and Papaw. Each must court the favor of their patriarchs. They glance toward the two old men who are seated at the table in the center of the room, and occasionally nod their heads toward them in deference.

The group knows Ed has his eye on the two-thousand-acre farm Great Uncle-Pete has let lie fallow for ten years. He wants to move his race-horses from Kentucky to Arkansas. Just last week his mistress agreed to move and the whole plan will be complete if he can provide her with a legitimate reason to be there in town, close to him. She's been his

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horse trainer for four years. Ed implores them for their support. Henry knows Ed's plan and is using it for leverage. In exchange for his approval, he wants half ownership in Ed's Ford dealership in Camden.

Gary creates a stir when he announces he secretly wed Julie six weeks ago at a small ceremony in Little Rock. The men already know about the marriage, of course, but don't let on. They approve and think she's hot, although none of them would admit to seeing her on Wayne O's calendar where she was photographed holding a fly rod while wearing only a fishing vest and a pair of waders. Gary met her at Bubbles, a lounge off Interstate 40 near North Little Rock. He admonishes the men, tells them to keep it to themselves until he's had a chance to smooth things over with Papaw. They all laugh when he tells them he had to buy her a diamond bracelet to get her to stay home today.

His ex-wife, Lydia, is well out of earshot. He would rather she'd stayed in Chapel Hill with her intellectual friends, but knew it was important for his girls to be here. Papaw was still sour about the divorce. Papaw doted on Lydia, always had. And everyone in the room felt slighted

because Papaw loved those three girls the most of all the grandchildren. He didn't try to hide it. And Great Uncle Pete, wasn't he just a disgrace the way he favored them?

What the men don't know is that Gary has their grandmother Sophia's wedding ring in his suit pocket. He fingers it while making his marital announcement. Grandmother Sophia, confined to a bed in Meadowview, gave him the ring when he remarked on the thievery in such places. Said he could take care of it for her. He also takes care of her silver tea service and her coin collection.

Over at the center table, Pete turns to Papaw, his brother. "It's a room chock full of crap. You know it as well as I do. Not a damn one of them worth a piss. Ed's after my farm. Goddamn fool. I can't wait to see his face when I tell him I signed it over to The Wildlife Consortium last week. It's a protected wetland; the idiot doesn't have enough sense to know he can't do anything with it. Not even a horse farm."

"Pete, I've got something that will really gall you. That fart Gary took Sophia's wedding ring. Right off her finger. I imagine he's going to marry that piece of strip joint fluff, if he hasn't done it already. The one that was half-naked, bare-assed, on the cover of some porn mag. What is it about tits and ass? I'll take Sophia's brain any day. Even if there's not much left of it. Give me a woman who can think for herself. That's sexy. I miss those debates as much as I miss her face, I tell you. God that woman could make a point. Take any side of an argument."

"He's an idiot."

"Give me some more of that Dewar's."

Pete surveys the room, quickly takes a silver flask out of his suit pocket and refreshes their drinks.

"Look out. Here comes Hazel...Act deaf."