

Green Grass

A Fable

ONCE UPON A TIME, there was a man who married a beautiful woman and they had a house with a road that stretched out before them looking so much like life. On the other side of the road, the grass was greener, but maybe it was because the man who owned it was a farmer, and in any event, the man with the beautiful wife thought the farmer a cranky neighbor. So he looked down the road.

Down the road was a fat woman with heavy mascara and swells of perfume, who sat behind the clipped hedge of her driveway, waiting for handsome married men to walk by. One day she saw the man walk slowly past her yard, absent the little blonde woman she sometimes saw with him at Star Market.

“Marry me!” she hissed from the hedge. She was a fat woman, and when she said these words, they swished around in her cheeks before she let them see air, so when they came out, they sounded like the hushed whisper of someone’s love.

96 “I can’t marry you,” said the man. “I am already married.” The man paused by the neatly paved driveway leading up to the dark brick ranch.

“Love me!” the woman said. “Let your children call me ‘Mom!’” The woman was a fat woman, but only because she’d swallowed so much hope and so many little bugs as she mowed her lawn each week in nice flat rows to make it green, green, green.

“Woman!” the woman’s husband yelled from the screen door of

the ranch house. "Make me dinner!" The woman's husband was not an evil man, just overtired from working a long day delivering Coca Cola to major universities in the area.

When the woman stood to go inside, the man noticed a strand of faux pearls dribbling into her cleavage, and that the gold-colored vest she wore was tight around her flowering chest. The man saw that the woman was bursting with life, desire, hope. The man was still young then, the age of his children now, and he thought life was just one big thing that stretched down a road.

That night, the man went home to his beautiful wife. "I'm going to do something, but I'm not going to tell you what because it will make you very sad," he told her.

"Oh! I don't want to be sad!" the beautiful wife said.

"So I won't tell you," the man said. "And, anyhow, if I don't tell you, I won't feel as guilty over what I'm about to do. I will tell you, my beautiful wife, that I am working late."

"Oh!" the wife said. "I hurt already! Here are your two babies. They will miss you, too."

The man looked at his two babies: boy, girl—girl, boy—the same selection as he could find anywhere. And besides, they seemed so skinny, so drained of desire and zest for life, that he wanted, for a moment, to put cotton in their cheeks to make them look cherubic. Instead, he said to his beautiful wife, "I must go now. I have to work."

"Why?" she said as he walked down the drive. The wife was a beautiful wife, with long blonde hair and pure hazel eyes. But as she watched her husband walk toward the road, she wanted very much not to hurt, to cinch the ache she felt rising in her chest. She swallowed a breath of air then, and held it tightly in her throat until she felt the ache subside, dissolve.

"Why?" she said again. "Why walk to work? Take the Honda."

And so the man worked for many years, and his children grew up, as he knew they would, but had barely believed. "Why are you always working?" they asked.

"I want to give you everything," the man told them. They were

the age he had once been, when he first saw the road. "I want you to have everything I did not have." It was true. He did work hard, he did want many things for them. He also wanted, very much, for them to believe in him and his beautiful wife, the strong power of two people raising two more. He sent them to universities of their choice, bought them both cars, and he and his blonde wife (now dyed) waved from the front door as the children backed out of the drive.

A long time ago, once, he hit her. (This is not the nice part of the fable; this is the brick oven, the wolf's teeth.) The children were young when it happened, though they did not understand then. But it was a long time ago, once.

Years later it came time for the daughter to have coffee with her father. She did not want to be adult when he told her, she wanted to slap her hands on the table and scream This Sucks! but she kept her hands at her side because she was learning things though she didn't want to. He told her that sometimes the fat lady from the hedge phoned at three in the morning and woke the beautiful wife, who now ate pastries and full dinners with second helpings, and now had a body large enough to contain her dormant hope.

The story didn't end because the daughter couldn't find the moral. Besides, Christmas was coming up, then Easter and so on.

"I love you," the man told his daughter. "This is so hard."

Because the moral has yet to be found, the story hasn't ended, but can take one of three paths:

1. The man shackles up with the fat lady from the hedge. The week he makes the move, he learns his beautiful wife signed up for lawn lessons, and now he's doomed to drive past the green green grass that used to be his own.

2. The man goes back to the beautiful wife and confesses. She acts shocked and enraged, though the truth is less than she suspected. She even cries a little bit, and walks away from the exchange with a mink, a diamond, a set of Calphalon pans, and the game point for every future argument.

3. Nothing happens. How could it? Of course the man goes back to his wife, of course they try to patch things up. The wife does cry, she is shocked, and the man knows that this is the hair-line fracture, the eggshell on which he must walk. Somewhere in this time he realizes that life is calculated in years and he's used half his up.