



**IN THESE TIMES
THE HOME IS
A TIRED PLACE**

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I Now Pronounce You
From

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Stories

By Jessica Hollander

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TO COME

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To Richard, an expert at combatting exhaustion.

I Now Pronounce You

In bed, the wife heard the sports announcer. Heard

the cheers and chants while washing her face in the bathroom—she didn't care. She didn't care her new husband woke before her, the sneak, and went downstairs to watch early-morning sports television. A good decision to marry him—rushed, frantic even, but the wife was two years post-college and sick-of-it, and the husband was an American flag: starry-eyed and pin-striped, a regal flourisher to those beneath him.

Drunk at the Hooters bar, the husband had watched her. He'd spoken loudly about the feminist movement and embracing one's sexuality. "Nobody has to hide beneath the covers anymore," he'd said, and she'd believed him.

Good to be a wife. Just back from her honeymoon, in the center of the clean-carpeted, big-roomed house—it was his—she adjusted. She had previously rented a gritty-floored apartment above a beauty salon that emitted all

sorts of smells and chemicals; she believed she'd become more beautiful walking constantly through them.

Sometimes she locked herself in the new husband's bathroom and hair-sprayed the walls and foamed mousse into the sink. On the toilet, she closed her eyes and remembered fretful, feral nights silky-legged with Hooters friends, and when she emerged steamed in the doorway, riotous and beautiful, she and the new husband gambled. Striptease Poker. Seven-Card Pose. Texas Hold-This.

Mornings, if she made enough noise on the stairs, the new husband turned off the television. He smiled from the couch and she, the new wife, said, "I heard something," and the new husband said, "I didn't mean to wake you!"

Good to be a newly-wed. She didn't care about the television. Her father too had been a sports fanatic, kept a game on all mealtimes, which he spoke to directly while

the rest of them communicated with brief addresses and subtle eye movements.

The new husband was content to be a husband. While she cooked, he swiveled on a kitchen stool explaining his spoon and spatula ordering, the gadgets string-strung above the stove. Cooking used to be a hobby belonging to him, but he wished the new wife to feel useful given she'd quit her job, given he was a successful flag and couldn't be married to a Hooter no matter how much she shocked the system.

He ate his scrambled eggs and toast separate. He refused to eat anything burnt even if she cut off the black parts—he could tell and it wasn't the same.

“Take it up with the kitchen,” the new wife told the new husband. They sat in the dining room, which was large and previously empty; the husband had kept many

rooms this way, like open terminals scattered through the house, waiting, perhaps, for a pre-packaged family to move in and stuff them with baggage. From her apartment, the new wife had contributed various items that weren't too torn or beer-stained, such as her folding card table: they sat here now. A pile of red and black chips lay in the middle.

“I like this place very much,” said the husband. He brushed some egg from the corner of her mouth. “I'll come here all the time. But the food sucks.”

“Nobody comes for the food,” said the new wife. “This is the twenty-first century.” She pawed his beard as though he had egg on his face too.

“Food is a necessity,” he said. “Kids, television, church, counseling—all the Great American Pastimes. After marriage, there is a husband and a wife.”

The new wife had on her plate four slightly burnt pieces of toast. The new husband had the sports page. Chewing her toast, she appreciated his handsomeness. To honor, to cherish. She appreciated the cheers from those side-lined enthusiasts, from her old Hooters friends, from the announcer. And with the true smell of hot dogs and the stickiness of beer born-and-brewed, the American flag waved above the field, and it was saluted.

Good to be a newly-wed. The husband and the wife: they were to be successful together. 'Til death. 'Til death. The wife was encouraged to believe it. So she believed it.

But sooner or later, in good times and in bad. In sickness and in health.

In the husband and wife's third year of marriage, a

from a third-story window after she'd slightly burnt some chicken and he'd refused to eat it. And also he had refused to leave his no-longer-new wife for the other woman because he'd realized the other woman was crazy. Besides, it was nice with the wife, who didn't complain when he watched sports in the morning and who stayed home and became a better cook and took care of their small son, whom he didn't much like but planned to increasingly as the son came to resemble more a small man than a wild animal.

All these feelings and missteps blurted to the no-longer-new wife in the emergency room overwhelmed her. Also, her no-longer-new husband would be ugly forever and have a limp and so could never move speedily from the house to the car when they were late for something—church, yoga, marriage counseling, Buddhist meditation—

and they were always late due to his sports-watching and loud, lengthy disagreements with the television and newspaper early in the morning.

Good to be a wife! Good to have the decision made pretty much for her: Stand by. Stand by. She nodded at the foot of the bed. She fell sideways into the nurse. The baby cried and the wife laid him gently on the floor. “I think he’s hungry,” she told the nurse. The wife ran from the room.

“You are a steel pole,” her mother said when the wife called from a bathroom stall in the hospital lobby. The wife opened her purse and lined her makeup along the toilet rim. Her mother said, “Your husband’s a flag just caught up in the wrong kind of wind.”

“Can you be more specific?” the wife asked. She sniffed her powder puff. She hairsprayed the stall around

her.

“You let that man tie himself to you and now everyone’s seen him waving.”

“But this is the twenty-first century!” The wife applied lipstick. Eyeliner—thick; blush—like her face would explode. “I’m allowed to be flagless.”

“This is a test. If you take the flag down now that it’s crippled, you’re a failure as a wife, as a woman, and as a human being.”

Good to be a wife. How easy and admirable to stay with her husband, which is what she did, and she took care of him. On the day he came home, she helped him up the stairs. He hadn’t looked at her directly since his first day at the hospital, and even now, a month later, he sighed frequently on the steps and turned away when she caught him staring.

“Let’s move on with it,” she said.

“You’re a model.” He couldn’t quite lift his legs enough to clear each step. He tripped without her close attention. Skin doctors had patched his face decently, though of course he would be scarred for life. He started crying. “You are a good wife!” It was painful for him.

“I’m a steel pole,” she said.

Every day the husband remained in bed until the wife was willing to help. She brought him to the dining room, where they ate all meals together: the wife, the husband, the baby in highchair, at an expensive wood table purchased from a fancy furniture store. The table was narrow and long, the kind where you could sit very close to each other or very far away. Still a pile of gambling chips lay in the middle. Still the husband and wife gambled a few nights each week after the son went to bed,

only instead of clothes and positions, the wife tossed in words with her chips: “Dignity,” “Independence,” “Life Free of Straitjackets.”

The husband cleared his throat, and when he won he said, “Although I now own your Hopes and Dreams fair-and-square, I’d like you to keep them.”

“Take them,” she said. “They’re rocks tied around my swollen ankles.”

Little sports were watched. Since for a long time the husband couldn’t move by himself, he had to ask from the bed, “Dear, would you mind? The television for a while?”

“The television is very contemporary,” the wife said. “Also, that girl you fucked. Something contemporary about her.”

The husband batted the sheets. He leaned from his propped pillow. “I must act out my masculinity

vicariously.”

She pushed him back against the pillow. He complied, though his face readied for a tantrum. “Once you get better,” she said, “you can act out your masculinity as a traditional man by returning to work and foundationing your family.”

However, she lived with a sneak. The moment he could lower himself from bed, the husband woke early and dragged himself downstairs in his boxer shorts. And she heard it. She didn’t care! Her husband was alive and watching football. She would treat his knees for rug burns from his vigorous trip across the carpet; at the same time she would cook breakfast and nurse the baby in a cradlehold across her chest.

Good to be a wife! Good to know she would swaddle down transgression or meanness or need for

welfare for the good of the family and the perpetuation of a society in which people stayed together for the good of the family. She had her marriage counseling. She had her prayer and meditation and stretches.

Who cared if she told old Hooters friends she saw on the street, “Don’t look at me.” Who cared if some mornings while her husband flexed his masculinity, she pulled out her old Hooters shirt and ripped tights and danced in front of the mirror or in front of the baby, who smiled and laughed in a way very different from her old patrons. The not-so-new wife appreciated her diluted beauty, her diluted sexuality. Occasionally during these early-morning dance sessions, with the applause and announcer beneath her feet, she wondered what would happen when she had a nervous breakdown, perhaps in the grocery store—it seemed a likely place, with all the juicy,

squeezable fruit.

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The minister had said it, six years ago—she remembered. “I now pronounce you man and wife.”

She didn't care about the pronouncement—man, wife. Man. Wife. They'd had a miniature wedding in her parents' backyard with only some blankets to sit on, and everyone who attended was either dead or delirious or so far in her past they were rendered obscure. Now, when the wife saw old friends on the street, she covered her face and ran the other way. A few chased after her, and when they caught her by the arms and saw who she was, they said, “I'm sorry, Miss. I thought you were someone else.”

So the husband was a flag, and she a mere wife—one couldn't spend a lifetime worried about being contemporary.

Her first attack hit in the bathroom one morning. She came to the end of her mascara and hurled the pink wand into the toilet. She flushed and flushed, screaming “Why won’t you take it?” when the wand resurfaced. Two hours later she came out of the bathroom, soaked in perfume, and when the husband asked what the problem was, she responded in a high voice: “Lady troubles!”

Her second attack hit a week later when she found a pair of pink laced underwear in the husband’s tennis shoe. She shredded it to pieces with her fingernails and baked a fun-fetti cake, which she served to the husband. She threw the leftovers in a heap on the back porch and told the dog about it.

Her third attack hit the following day when picking her son up from pre-little-league football. Still in his padding, he hurled himself into the side of the car—this

was for fun—and she drove away without him and ditched the car by the side of the highway. An hour later the authorities found her sprawled on the edge of a creek, scooping gray water over her face.

The cop who saves her is a flag, and he feels sorry for her. She reminds him of his mother. His wife. His little girl. In different ways, she is all of them and also every woman he's ever met. She tells the flag on the way to the station. She tells him everything. Her whole life and the history of a society that brought them here. She lives in a house of sports. She suspects the hideous freak flag attached to her pole has found another pole. Most nights she sits at a diamond-studded table gambling away her pride, her body, her life.

The wife wants to know why she has to be the wife. Couldn't she be the flag and the flag be the wife because

this is fiction where anything's possible and stories might as well be used for good instead of reinforcing stereotypes.

The cop and the author want to know how a Hooters waitress married to a traditional sports-loving American flag knows and cares so much about the problems with gender roles and how they're perpetuated.

And yes, you have to be the wife because you are the wife. You agreed to these terms when you were married. Furthermore, you are a woman. You agreed to these terms when you were born, debatably, but certainly when you bought your first dress, when you painted your room pink, when you worked the job you worked through college, where you mastered so many seductive salutes you were voted Little Miss Patriot. And now you're on your way to a nervous breakdown, which is traditionally a

female condition, and you are headed to jail and then probably to a mental institution, where you will be kept for your flags to visit at their leisure. They will bring you flowers and chocolate and you will be glad to have them. Even if this story took place in some alternate reality on some undiscovered planet where all titles were flags and shoe sizes were equal and everyone opened doors for each other and walked naked without judgment; even if flags allowed sorry specimens to flap among them, you, the wife, could never pull off stars-and-stripes.