

Where You Lay Your Dreams

by Brendan McKennedy

My divorce is further along than Lila's, so at lunch I give her practical advice. "The less contact you have, the better you'll feel, almost immediately." She reheats pasta alfredo and its musky awakening fills the break room. Salt, garlic. She's younger than I am and keeps her hair short as a boy's and dyed red. Her marriage to Kareem lasted only two years, and there are no children involved, so I feel gracious in treating their breakup seriously. "Listen to this text," she says. "I think he's drunk." She wears a black tank top. Her bra straps are cool and green like spearmint gum. In her dopey man-voice impression she reads, "Baby where you lay your dreams last night?" The microwave beeps and when she opens the door to stir the sauce, I glimpse the oven's filthy, spattered interior.

"That's what's called change-back behavior." With wet paper towels I rub scabs of ketchup from the tabletop. "He's trying to get you to return to the old, dysfunctional dynamic."

"Should I text him back? I want to say something that really burns."

"I wouldn't."

All morning we endured this motivational training session, the theme of which was "Focus on Growth." I sat there and my blood prickled like pine straw in my veins, in my heart. All I could do was watch Lila's feet, stretching in her sandals. The presenter whose name was Jim made several sports metaphors but ultimately admonished us to be like the trees. "The trees, they don't take all that energy, all that water and sunlight, all these gifts from God --

and just throw it away. On negativity. On stinkin' thinkin'. Every bit of it they put to use. To grow. Upward and outward."

I tell Lila that last night Cindy called me after eleven just to start a fight. In all my marriage stories, I am both victim and hero. Cindy complained that I hadn't tried to see the twins in nine weeks. Her voice a hot bundle of wires in my ear. "I'm working 30 hours of overtime," I told her. "I go home and I go straight to bed." She reminded me that she can still log in to the bank account. Can see where every penny goes.

Lila says, "I think you're right. I think we're all better off alone." The spray of freckles on her face and shoulders calms me. The shape of her lips. "I sleep so good with that whole big bed all to myself."

"Yeah, maybe." I take the lid off my salad and it stretches before me for miles.

"Upward and outward." Lila's phone chimes. On the counter beside her, the microwave's dim yellow light reminds me of a tiny bedroom, within which invisible forces stir sleeping molecules to heat and unrest. She flips open the phone to read the new text. Her eyes dancing. Her fingers swollen where she's chewed off the nails.

