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FICTION

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# WILD THING

Larry Brown

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The came into a bar I was in one night and she took a stool. I noticed the tight jeans, the long brown hair, the pretty red blouse. A woman like her, you have to notice. That's what you're sitting in there for.

I noticed that she looked around to see who was in the bar. There weren't many people in there. It was early yet. So I began to wonder about her. A good-looking woman, alone in the early evening in a sort of redneck bar. I guess she felt me watching her. She turned to look at me and she smiled for several seconds, and then she leaned over and spoke to the bartender who soon brought her a beer.

I'd been out of things for a while. I was having trouble with my wife. One of the things that was wrong was that I was spending too many nights away from home, and it was causing fights that were hard for me to win. It's hard to win when you don't have right on your side. It's hard to win when you know that your own fucking up is causing the problem.

Boys from work, some friends I was supposed to meet, they hadn't shown up. I had a table to myself because it was more comfortable than a stool. A basketball game was on, with the sound off, lots of guys jumping around, other people like me watching it. I looked at the bar and tried to see the woman's face in the mirror behind the bottles. She didn't look old. Sometimes at first glance the bodies look young, but the faces, on closer examination, are not. This one didn't look old.

I sat there without watching what was going on the television screen. I didn't know why I didn't just get up and go home. I could see them all in the living room, sitting in front of the television without me. My wife would be in the bed asleep when I went in, probably, if she wasn't sitting up waiting on me. There were times when I couldn't stand to stay there. Leaving the house like I did made it hard on everybody. I knew the kids asked her where I went and why I went. I didn't know what she told them. I didn't want to think about what she told them. I knew if I let up they would stop asking after a while. I knew that would be as bad as anything.

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She kept sitting there, looked around a little, smoking a cigarette. After a while she got down off her barstool and went to the jukebox and dug some change out of her pocket. Her jeans were so tight she had trouble getting the money out, like she'd been melted and poured into them. I watched her. She leaned over the panel of bright lights and set her beer down and held the cigarette between the fingers of her left hand, moving her head a little to what was already playing.

And she turned around and looked straight at me and asked me what I liked. I smiled, told her to play E19.

"What's that?" she said, through the music. I picked up my beer and went over to her. That was the start of it. She smiled when she looked down and saw that it was Rod Stewart and Jeff Beck on "People Get Ready." I stood beside her and pulled some quarters from my own pocket. I could smell the light fragrance of her, and I pointed to some other good ones. She took the quarters that I handed her and told me how sweet I was. Her face was happy and animated, and I could feel us making a connection already. All I had to do was be halfway cool, maybe not tell any stupid jokes, ask her about herself, and let her tell me about herself, since self is everybody's favorite subject and they'll think you're a brilliant conversationalist if you get them started talking on that. We played Journey and Guns N' Roses and Randy Travis and Joan Baez and Sam Cooke. Then I told her to come on and sit with me.

More people came in but I didn't notice them. I kept ahead of her drinking-wise so that I could keep paying, and after three I looked around and saw that the bar was full of people. I didn't tell her that I was married and she didn't ask. She kept talking to me, leaning over toward me. Pushing one strand of her long brown hair back to the side. She worked in a factory somewhere in town at a desk and a computer and she had moved here recently, she said. We got closer and she put her hand on my arm. We laughed and drank and listened to the music.

Later I asked her if she wanted to go for a ride and she said yes. I had some beer iced down in the trunk. They got a crazy law in this country. You can't go in a store and buy cold beer; you can only buy it hot. So you have to get a cooler and keep it in the car. You have to always be thinking ahead. We left together, her arm holding onto my arm, her leg brushing mine, people I knew watching.

She sat close to me in the car, her hands touching me. We left town and went out into the country and rolled the windows down. She dug in her purse and held up a twisted length of grass in a pink paper and I nodded and smiled. After that the music never sounded better. We rode nearly to the end of the country and I stopped on a bridge and got us another beer out of the trunk and she sat in the car



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while I stood near the rear fender taking a leak. The night was clear, all the stars out, summer on its way. I got back in the car and she was all over me, hands, mouth, I don't know how long it went on right in the middle of the bridge.

Finally I pulled away and told her that we had to go someplace else. She asked me if I knew of such a place. I said yes I did.

It wasn't too far from there, up a winding old road with gravel, an old house place with just the chimney sticking up among the stars when we pulled up. I pushed the lights off. Everything was slow and clear because of the grass. When I killed the motor I could hear everything. Bullfrogs sounding in a pond down in the woods. Whippoorwills calling in the trees. The sound of cars somewhere, far off. She came to me and I held her and she put my hands on the places they wanted to be. When I kissed her she went back on the seat and pulled me down on top of her. She was more than eager. She seemed desperate. And I was the same way.

She was tight, so much that it hurt both of us for a while. I even asked her if she was a virgin but she said no. She was smooth and fine and her skin was silky and warm under my hands. Then a car drove up. I saw the lights in the tops of the trees, raised up and saw two headlights coming slowly around a curve. We had to try and find our underwear in the floorboard and our pants and the car kept coming while we jerked things on and then it stopped and just sat there with its lights shining on us. I had one sock on and no shirt. I don't know what she had on.

"I thought you said this place was safe," she said.

"I thought it was. Hell. I don't know who this is."

The car sat there. I went ahead and put on my shirt and pants.

"Shit," I said. I cranked the car and turned it around and pulled up beside whoever it was. The car kept sitting there. I couldn't see anybody inside. It was like nobody was driving it. Then we went on past and out of sight.

She didn't say anything for a while. I stopped a mile or two down the road and got us another beer from the trunk. I handed her one and she took it silently.

Owls were hooting out there in the dark beside the road. She opened the beer, lit a cigarette, and just sat drinking and blowing smoke out the window.

Finally she said: "Next time we'll get us a room."

Right, I thought. Next time. Nah. There wouldn't be a next time.

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The lights were off at the house. She'd even cut the carport light off. Easing in, or trying to, I bumped into things. There wasn't even a lamp on. And then suddenly there was, with her hand on it, and the quick furious anger all over her face.

"Where you been?" she said.

"Riding around," I muttered.

"You know what time it is?"

I was heading into the bedroom with my shirt already unbuttoned, but I stopped and looked back at her.

"No. What time is it?"

She tapped her foot on the floor and reached for her cigarettes.

"You can't keep doing me like this," she said.

I was tired and I didn't want to hear it. All I wanted to do was close my eyes and try to sleep a little before the alarm went off.

"Okay," I said. "Okay. Now please let me go to sleep."

I left her in there, smoking, tapping her foot. I went into the dark bedroom, where my baby son was sprawled in sleep in the middle of our bed, and I took my clothes off, lay down beside him, touched his hair, and the side of his face. I loved him. I knew what I was doing to him. He never moved. I thought of how horrible my life was and then I closed my eyes. Just before I drifted off to sleep I was vaguely aware of her getting into bed. She didn't speak, and the next thing I knew the alarm was going off.

I decided not to go to work that day. I have the kind of job where I don't have to be there every day, and people working for me who can take care of things. I wanted to go fishing. I wanted to be on a boat in a lake with a pole in my hand and crickets or minnows in a bucket or a box and a cooler full of cold beer to help me think over everything I needed to think over.

Later that day I was on the lake, in the boat, a beer in my hand, fishing. I eased up to a stump where I thought a few crappie might be hiding out. I caught a little minnow from the bucket, put the hook through his back, and lowered him down to meet some of his big brothers. It kept going down, never did stop, and I pulled in one that weighed about two pounds. I had another cooler with ice just for fish and I put him in there. It looked like I was going to lay them in the shade. But after another hour, I hadn't caught another fish. I fished up, down, all around, changed minnows, squirted on Mister Fishter, did everything I



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knew, and still I had just that one fish in my cooler. Finally I let my cork rest and took stock of things.

I was fucking up with these other women. I wasn't spending any time with my kids.

My wife and I never spoke to each other hardly unless we were arguing. I couldn't stand to stay home, and I hated myself every time I went out. Now I'd met another one, and she seemed wonderful except for the car pulling up and catching us, which hadn't been her fault. I wasn't catching any fish, and since it was only ten o'clock in the morning, I knew that if I kept drinking beer I was headed for a bad drunk sometime later that day. Possibly, even a DUI conviction. For the moment I was safe. I wasn't driving anything but my boat, and they couldn't get me out there, unless it was some gung-ho officer of the Mississippi game wardens, and I knew all of them. I knew I'd probably be facing another bad scene when I got home, whenever I got home. I knew I could probably make everything right by going home with a big load of fish and dressing them and cooking a good supper for my whole family, but the problem was I'd only caught one and it didn't look like I was going to catch any more now that I'd started drinking beer. There comes a time some days when you say fuck it, and I didn't know whether to say that early in the morning or not. I hated to. I'd said it so much in the past and it hadn't ever helped anything. It looked like the whole problem was with me, looked like my wife could just keep rocking on the way she was until she was old and gray and sixty and I couldn't. It seemed like we were raising our children simply for their own benefit and not for ours. But our own lovemaking had brought that. Now it seemed we'd locked into a position that was far beyond our imagining when we'd married, and there didn't seem to be any recourse. Be born, live, bear children in turn, get old, die. There didn't seem like there ever was anything else. And there didn't seem like there ever was anything else. And there didn't seem like there was ever anything else since man had been man, since the first primitive ape-person — was that Adam? — crawled down from the tree and found a female under another tree and hauled her away to a cave, where he ravished her. I was uneasy about a lot of things, my own mortality among them. I didn't know if when I died I was going to die forever, or maybe just for twenty years, and come back as a house cat or something. The whole universe was a secret to me, including what happened over there in Siberia in the 1920's when something hit the ground and knocked all that timber down and set all those woods on fire. I was uneasy about the Bermuda Triangle, and how long I could keep getting up and getting it up, and afraid I'd never find the best woman in the whole world for me to love. I decided I'd better just keep drinking beer and keep my hook in the water and hope for the best.

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It was nearly dark when I got home. I had three miserable fish, and all the ice I'd had on them had melted. Still, I was determined to cook fish for my family. My wife was just walking into the carport with a basketful of clothes. The kids were playing ball in the yard. Me, I was pretty drunk.

My wife came up to me and tried to kiss me and we messed around some right there in the carport and she got hot, and before I knew it we were back in the bedroom with our clothes partway off, bumping together like two minks. That was when one of my kids shot his head around the side of the window where we'd been in too big a hurry to close the blinds and said

"Hey, Dad! Want to pitch a few balls?"

He slunk away, with many looks back. I got my clothes on and got the hell away from there.

Some more nights later I was in the bar again and I saw her come in again but I didn't look at her and she did her jukebox routine again without my quarters, but with glances over her shoulder at me several times. I was nursing a beer.

I'd been sitting there thinking about things for a while. I wasn't too keen on going back to work the next morning, and was pretty sure the boys could handle it for a few days without me. I knew she was going to sidle over, and pretty soon she did.

"What you got the blues about?"

"Nothing. Sit down."

"We gonna do it again tonight?"

"I don't know if we will or not."

"I wish we would."

"I don't know."

"Please."

"Since you put it like that."

We wound up back in the same place. I knew that lightning didn't strike twice, that I couldn't be unlucky two nights in a row. We shucked down, were moving and grooving and saying baby baby baby when the lights came around the curve. I sat up in the seat and reached under it for my pistol, told her I was getting a little tired of this shit. I had just my pants on when I stepped out of the car. I had that little hogleg down beside my leg. Somebody threw a spotlight in my face and told me to freeze, and I heard a couple of shotgun safeties snick off real soft.



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"Just hold it , boy. Now turn around. Now drop that gun. Now spread out on the fender there."

I got frisked while she was putting her clothes on and she was fully dressed by the time they decided to shine their lights on her. They weren't pissed that I had the gun, they were just pissed that I'd messed up their dope surveillance and when they went to looking through her purse I had a few bad moments, but it turned out that she'd wisely hidden her joints inside her panties, and being the southern gentleman they were, they weren't about to ask her to disrobe again.

They told me they'd appreciate the shit out of it if I'd find someplace else to park because they were working on busting some people right there and they were sure I didn't want to be mixed up in it. I told them No sir, Budweiser was my only vice. We booked on out of there, and I think it was like 3:47 when I got on in home, after we'd finished with a motel room we'd used for twenty-four minutes. I got on my forklift the next day and drove it all around the plant. We had to load a bunch of dishwashers and it took all day. I thought I never would get out of here. But finally the day ended and I just had enough time to get to the Little League game, where all the upstanding other fathers were standing around watching their kids swat, and there I sat, mired down in a lawn chair, getting depressed when my own small slugger struck out or missed making a catch. It was a hard life, and I didn't know if I was going to be able to keep on living it.

My wife came over and sat down next to me and said: "What you doing?"

"Nothing."

"You want to take the kids out to eat after the game?"

"Not really."

"What you got planned?"

"Nothing."

"You don't enjoy this, do you?"

"Not really."

She looked at me. "You hate being married, don't you?"

"Why do you say that?"

She looked back at the game. "Because. I can tell."

I watched them play for a while. Mothers were yelling. Once in a while a pop fly would sail over the fence. One kid got hit in the eye and started crying and had to be replaced. They gave him a towel with some ice in it, and somebody else held his hand and bought him a snow cone.

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"You want a divorce?" she said.

"Not really."

"Well," she said. "I hate you're so unhappy."

Then she got up and left me sitting there.

We happened again about a week later. I'd had two beers and she came in. She didn't even mess around with the juke-box, she just made a beeline for me and got me by the arm.

"Come on over to my house," she said. I thought, Hell's bells. Thought, Why didn't we do this before?

We rushed on over there, to a darkened apartment, and stumbled in, pulling our clothes off and kissing in the living room. She couldn't wait for the bed, had to get down on the couch. She was moaning, and stuffing a pillow into her mouth, and that's where we were when a vehicle pulled in up front, shining lights in through the picture window, all the way through the curtains. She started making some frantic motions but I thought it was just the heat of passion. Then the lights went off. They don't have adequate parking in those places sometimes anyway, but the car door slammed so hard I thought something about it, and the next thing I knew the front door was opening and the light was on in the living room and there we were, with a big maniac with a lug wrench coming toward the couch. I jumped up and threw a pillow in his face, and he knocked the stuffing out of the couch where my leg had been. She screamed while he was calling me 900 motherfuckers, and I saw he was fixing to kill me. My dick was waving around in front of me just briefly. I didn't mess around with any diplomacy, I picked up a kitchen chair and hit him in the face with it, and the way blood flew was awful. I called her about 900 different kinds of bitch before I got my clothes on and got out of there, but I did get out of there, hoping like hell he wasn't dead.

I didn't know what to do after that, whether to go fishing or just say no to everything. I wanted to run off. I even figured out how long I could live in another town with the money in my checking account. But he didn't know me, and I didn't know him.

Of course he'd seen my face, some of it anyway. He'd be trying his best to hurt me real bad for sure if he could. Somebody busted my face with a kitchen chair, I'd be looking to return the favor.

So I stayed home. Didn't go out and hit any bars. I hung around the house and watched TV, drank coffee on the couch. Helped the kids with their homework.



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Played Daddy. I came in before her a couple of times and started supper and put clothes in to wash. Mopped the kitchen floor. Dusted the furniture. She got to glowing, and things were great between us in bed. But I wanted the other one again because it was different and it was dangerous now, and so the peace and tranquility only lasted about a week, nine days tops.

The last time I saw him, he came in the bar with her. I was sitting at my table in the corner, back to the wall, watching who came in the door. They saw me about the same time I saw them. She was drunk off her ass. They went to the bar but he eyeballed me, wouldn't turn his back on me. Smart move. I saw him checking the exits. He kind of straddled a stool. They ordered drinks and the drinks came and paid. I was wondering what to hit the son of a bitch with this time. There was probably a shotgun behind the counter, but I knew I'd never make it to that.

There was always the side door, but I didn't think I was quite ready for that. I wanted to see what her act was, what the game she was playing was, what I was gambling with over a small piece of nearly skinny ass.

I got up and put some money in the jukebox and sat back down. People get ready. . . And Jeff Beck cut loose and filled the whole place up with his guitar. The people shooting pool moved to it. The drunks sitting around the bar wished it was them playing it. She swayed on the barstool and looked over her shoulder at me and winked, and his beer slammed down, and he was coming, and I picked up the wooden chair I was sitting in and gave it to him, this time straight across the teeth.

Nobody said a word when I walked out with her, especially not him.

We found some place off in the woods again, not the same place, not her house, not a motel room, just a place off in the woods. Crickets were chirping. Coon dogs or fox dogs somewhere were running. She fed the end of the joint to me and I fed it back to her and, while all that was going on in the face of what all had gone on, I wondered: what was the purpose? But I didn't want to think about things much right then. She laid lips on me, and we moved down in the seat, and I knew that it wouldn't be but a little bit before those headlights, somebody's, would ease around the curve.

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Excerpted from *Big Bad Love*

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*Larry Brown is one of America's greatest short story masters. A professional fireman in Mississippi, Brown taught himself to write with no formal education. He went on to become one of the most lauded Southern authors ever and is seen as a founder of Grit Lit. Most recently David Gordon Green made his novel Joe into a feature starring Nic Cage. This story first appeared on NERVE in 2002.*

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