

Residual Desire

J. Jill Robinson

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Michael. Only she knew the taste of him between his toes, the scent of him behind his ears. Only she had ever kissed every square inch of him, every round, soft inch of him from head to precious foot—he seduced her completely, he brought her great joy. Her boy, her love, her boy. She ached to kiss him again. Once. Just once.

This collection of short stories, the fourth from this award-winning author, is an unsentimental examination of women. Robinson's characters wonder, Am I doing the right thing? Did I marry the right man? Is my life going anywhere? In "Her Heart's Content," Mauve sits beside a window and watches the world swirl past her. Having recently buried her young son, Michael, she has spiraled into a pit of stagnation, spending her days eating Aero bars, staring out the window, and pushing herself to feel something, anything, picking ruthlessly at a scab on her chin to prove she's still alive. "She liked that it hurt. The pain grew familiar." Later she grabs at her nipples, remembering that sex with her husband had once been so enjoyable. Now, "nothing. That was dead, too."

In "Quicksand," middle-aged Ann and her sisters clean out their dying Aunt May's house, stumbling along memory lane as they recall pieces of her life. Ann, in particular, discovers an unexpected kinship with the old woman, remembering a reoccurring nightmare Aunt May had had decades before: "I am walking along, she said, and I see something large and dark sinking in quicksand, and I am afraid it is going to happen to me." Ann suddenly sees herself, thirty or so years in the future, struggling, like Aunt May, to preserve her dignity in a bleak nursing home. "What can one hope for in a place like this, with a disease like this?" she thinks as she starts to cry.

Robinson's stories are dramatic and heart wrenching, but, impressively, there's nothing heavy-handed or unbelievable in her delivery. Her characters probe the most vulnerable underbellies of their lives-lost loves, aging fathers, jealous sisterhoods-and push the reader to do the same.

Robinson, the winner of a Western Magazine Award and Prism International's fiction contest, teaches creative writing and English Literature at St. Peter's College in Muenster, Saskatchewan. Her writing style, like her approach to each pain-filled topic, is intelligent and straightforward. She doesn't hide behind fancy adjectives or convoluted story lines. Unapologetically, she heads straight towards the heart of the most confused characters, making it easy to forgive their flaws, and understand their missteps.

Residual Desire has already been named a Saskatchewan Book of the Year for Fiction. The collection is not a cheer-filled read, but Robinson's ability to shine an industrial strength fluorescent light on issues rarely discussed openly is nonetheless cathartic.

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