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Slow Dance

Melissa McDaniel
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"Our life is frittered away by detail. Simplify simplify." *—*Henry David Thoreau

That line becomes the mantra of a mom of two in her early forties with a career as a university administrator in Wisconsin. Sheila excels at meeting expectations a trait inculcated by her mother who is an accomplished emotional blackmailer. Accountant husband Charles is a mild straightforward man with no idea of the depth of his wife's unhappiness and this otherwise highly functional couple lacks sexual fireworks. A pleaser by temperament Sheila finally pauses amidst multiple commitments to question whether she had any choice but to be a bastion of responsibility living without genuine love. Should she break the inertia to see if the unknown brings greater satisfaction? Her search for the answer to this question rips her family apart.

The mother—daughter history of subverted love-matches and dismissed suitors is key to Sheila's midlife rebellion. A dumped fiancé stills weighs on her mind. She married mom-approved Charles as a default choice ignoring the absence of sparks. Now that her mother is elderly and infirm Sheila decides "I want a life not so cluttered with things and obligations"…"I need someone who can look into my soul and nourish me with love." She's in search of a welcoming place for her more authentic self. The South appeals but there is need of a patient dialect interpreter. Everyone operates a bit closer to the earth there; they soften embarrassment with modifying euphemism because "'…fixin' to leave' is not quite as horrible as 'cheating.'"

The protagonist's opposition is predominately internal. Self-doubt and chronic consideration over the impact of choices to establish a new home and see less of her children are given undue authorial attention. In fact the children's personalities aren't more than roughed-in. There's too much hand-wringing and not nearly enough revelatory detail about Earl; after their first physical encounter Sheila wants this charismatic man enough to sacrifice everything.

One ongoing situation is simply bizarre. Sheila remains friends for years with a man who has ended his marriage and stalks her daily movements expending thousands of dollars in the process. The obsession is slightly disturbing to her but it also provides a nice boost for Sheila's confidence. (Finally someone who really understands the benign aims of stalkers…) Again this is the harmony-seeking reflex at work.

Slow Dance describes very well the speed at which the heroine sorts out a psychological conflict millions have faced before. It demonstrates the incredibly lasting hold a controlling idea can have once the targeted person accepts and integrates it. McDaniel's moral is a message of realism: Sometimes even the best available choice is going to wreak damage but inaction can be even worse.
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