

The Wall

Jessica Corey-Butler

She sneaks up the stairs and into the bedroom. In the dark, she quietly fumbles for a pair of sweats and a ratty fleece top to sleep in, and creeps into bed. Shivering, she stretches her legs toward his sleeping form, hoping the halo of warmth surrounding him will emanate her way, hoping to lay her body next to his.

Instinctively, he shrinks away, curling himself into a fetal ball. She scoots more of her self into his left-behind warm spot, inadvertently touching his back. He snaps, “dude, back off.”

She slides back into the cold of her side of the bed, back over the wall in the mattress demarcating “his” from “hers.” Still shivering, she tries to sleep, remembering how things might have been in that bed ten years ago, before the wall was built.

What they did together then: Drink beer. Make love. Laugh. Watch *The Simpsons*. Discover parks with the greyhounds. Take road trips. Ride snowboards and mountain bikes. Wear each other’s oversized flannel shirts.

What he wears now: \$60 Nordstrom shirts with \$100 fine wool trousers and \$80 ties. One weekend a month, and two weeks a year: the camouflage ACU. Other weekends and evenings: sweats with his old, ratty fleece shirts.

What they do together now: One afternoon a month, meet for a cocktail. Occasionally have sex. Argue. *Him:* watch football upstairs. *Her:* watch Barbie movies with their daughter, downstairs. Discover parks with their daughter. Occasionally fly somewhere.

She thinks about the trips. She remembers their last trip together to Houston, which their daughter calls “a land far far away.” He was at a business conference; they joined up toward the end of the conference. Together, they visited his paternal family and saw his deceased father’s home.

She remembers the other trips of the year. *Him:* To Las Vegas to go to strip clubs with his high school friends. Business trips, to Virginia, Minnesota, California, and Houston. *Her:* with their daughter, two trips to Florida to see

her sister. Mostly, his trips are about decompressing from the stressors of day-to-day long hours, looming future fears, and financial strains. Her trips are about connecting with people who care for her.

The ridge in the bed that separates them acts like a demilitarized zone. Even early in the relationship, they both agreed they slept better without physical contact; no pesky entanglements of legs, arms, and torsos kept them awake nights, though occasional bouts of horizontal fun did. They whispered sweet words, giggled like children, and slept peacefully together, though physically apart. As years progressed, her spot on the bed was the indent on the right, his was the indent on the left. The mattress stayed tall in the middle, creating a ridge.

Things about her that irritate him: Long hours spent at the computer, working. Inconsistency in housekeeping. A lack of cooking. Cooking soups, when she does cook. Cell phone calls. Financial irresponsibility. Late nights out, a by-product of her job.

Things about him that irritate her: His critical nature.

The clock says 3:13 a.m. He'll be awake and going to work in two hours, while she'll wake up and deal with their daughter, her work, the house, dinner, and the dogs in about four. Through it all, she'll feel lonely, like she needs connection and warmth.

She reaches over the wall in the bed, holding her hand over his head, careful not to touch him as he snores. His heat radiates into her hand, and she cautiously scoots her body to the top of the ridge, close enough to steal his heat but not so close as to wake him.

She whispers "I love you," as she closes her eyes and falls asleep.