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The sixth night, ungodly stiff, jeez your back, the mattress hard as a church pew, the young ones stabbing your kidneys, your breasts, with elbows and heels, or breathing all over your face and if there's one thing you can't tolerate, the thing heading the list, Sayward Tyne's great list of things not to be tolerated, it is that: the hot breath of a sleeper competing with yours, never mind that it's coming from your own wee one. There's a draft that's got your nose all runny now and the cover's bunched about the two children, clenched under arms and legs curled about in it, blankets worn thin years ago, and now the ear's starting to ache. Ear's aching, nose running, cold, stiff, the pain in the back, a permanent sort, nothing to feel good about—not here, not now— 'cept maybe that they're too young to know what's going on and they like new places and they ate thrice today and they're sleeping warm.

You've fucking done it to yourself again, Sayward, the fucking princess of fucking up. But no, he needed it, the son of a bitch, needed a good jolt this time. I'll not be married to the man, him knocking me about, fucking strangling me this time, and it was the red marks there about my neck that earned me the week in the safe house. You should have seen old Sayward, running her fingers rough along those marks all night that night, making sure they didn't go away, 'cause they were too good to be true is all. Marks are hard to come by—he's usually careful about leaving any marks. That's why he likes to hit the back of your head and yank you about by the hair. I'd rather he broke the nose, really, 'cause then you can wear it up front, point to it, say see what the son of a bitch did to me. But it's hard to explain a fucking lump on the head, no broken skin, no bleeding, no broken bones, no visible bruises. Actually, she could hold her own with Nathan most times, and he only cut loose on her when she got up in his face and accused him of fucking about, or bitched at him 'bout his drinking. And truth be told, I'd done my share of shoving and slapping. Busted his lip good one night. But he had it coming this time. There was a definite lack of balance, now, with him winning every time and fucking around, you know he's been fucking around, and staying out till dawn some nights and not wanting to touch you, and by god there aren't a handful of men that he works with that wouldn't give a week's salary to be touching old Sayward. They've said as much and he's heard them when she used to work a man's job, a

real job, side by side with them. But that was before the accident.

Well, you can't have it, can't let yourself be a fucking coward, gotta stand apart there and say well fuck you and your house and your fucking temper and your drinking and your fucking whore whoever she is and you'll not have the pleasure of touching me again. He can just go jack himself in a corner. Cause you're not nothing, you know, Sayward, you're still fine. I've kept myself fit, I have, running after these kids here. And the accident hadn't slowed her down too much, even though there were limitations. Good to go—could go a round with any man, I could. But Nathan's an ox, got the brain of an ox, too, but got the heart big as one most times and that's what you're missing, Nathan's big arms wrapping you up while you sleep, laying here, cold and stiff, in a house that don't belong to you nor to anyone you know even.

Safe house, my ass, the car parked out front, all he's got to do is ride by and see it. Not a soul here to keep him from busting through that door, knocking the life out you, and hauling off the kids. A cop that drives by with his spotlight facing the house twice a night. I know because I can't sleep nights. No curtains on the window here by the bed—there's your draft—and I keep looking at those black sheets of glass thinking maybe a face will pop up. How safe is that? Could shoot a person sleeping right here in this bed through that window. What's to stop you? A chain link fence out back that any little thief could hurdle?

The first night here, there'd been a light flashing about in the yard inside that chain link fence and when she knelt beside the window, squinting into the darkness, she saw it was a man prowling about with a flashlight. Your heart takes a hit of adrenaline when you see the likes of that, and Sayward freaked and screamed into the den of the house and the two black girls that were co-occupants of the house snuffed out a joint they'd been sharing, saying what you talking 'bout girl? Each grabbed one of my elbows and pulled me down to the floor—what you see Sayward? And the one said to the other, Nicole, go look out back? Nicole stared wide--suck what? And the bossy one rolled her eyes—nigga, please, get your fucking claws off me. I go.

Course it was only a policeman walking the premises with a flashlight, checking the windows 'cause there was a new girl in the house. Sayward, the new girl. The two black girls started pumping perfume in the air and when they opened the door and let the officer in, I told him--you scared the shit out of me 'cause my old man said if I took the kids and left he'd kill me and I knew you were him, or one of his friends. You should have seen the look on the black girls' faces—your old man got a contract out on you? The lady brought you here didn't say nothing 'bout no contract on you. Well, that's it—I ain't staying in no house with nobody that's got no contract on 'em. You tried to explain to them, not a contract really, he only said it was so. But the bossy one was pulling a pair of jeans over her fat hips in a flurry of movements, saying Your husband a white man? White men say they gone kill you, I don't fuck around with 'em. Black men say it all day long—in one ear and out the other--but a white man—ever heard of a serial killer that was a black man?—no, white mens be serious talking about fucking you up. Then, let's go, says the bossy one to the other who was dressed already. They headed out the front door, big purses flopping against their hips and I'd stood in the door and watched them walk down the sidewalk to the street, mumbling to themselves. Fuck 'em. I crawled back into the bed with my kids.

You can't sleep after something like that and a window like that right by the bed and all. But it didn't matter anyway, 'cause an hour after they left, the lady in charge of the house was bringing them back. Seems the cops had picked them up and called her to come get them at the station. So the doorbell's ringing an hour later and you get up and look out the front window. There they stand, arms crossed, the bossy one rolling her eyes at me peeping at her through the window. And old Sayward was nervous about opening that door, I can tell you, 'cause the look on the lady's face, she was pissed as two cats with their tails knotted together. And then she's on you like white on rice—what on earth did you tell these girls?—well I hope you know you have scared them silly—you have truly caused a disruption here. And you want to know what the fuck right this bitch thinks she has to be up in your face, pissing and moaning like that—this is a safe house, ain't it? Aren't they in danger, too? Or no? They just hanging out here, is that what you trying to tell me? You should oughta be bitching at them, lady, they're the ones broke the house code--leaving without permission—

leaving at night. You should have told me, she goes, you should have told me of the death threats. It does make a difference, you see. Tomorrow, you'll need to see if you can move your car into the back yard. I don't know if it'll fit through the gate back there, but it's not good for it to be sitting out front.

The two girls sat themselves down on the loveseat in the den. The bossy one grabbed the remote and turned the tv on. Loud. The lady of the house left and I locked the door behind her. I turned, stared. The quiet one flung a finger toward me without taking her eyes off the tv—you stay the fuck on your side of the room—don't want you no where near me—I ain't taking no stray bullet aimed at your narrow ass.

The next morning, there we stood, Sayward and the lady of the house, standing behind the big beige Impala, staring, their hands cupping their elbows, perplexed. The Impala was wedged just inside the gate, the side mirrors the only thing stopping it from going through. It would have been the perfect place for it, the lady said, what with the vines growing all up around the fence that way. We sighed defeat and I re-parked the car in the front where it's been all this time. I'd been told the rules--no contact with anyone for seven days--no phone for seven days--no leaving the house for seven days--no leaving the house after seven days unless you let her know where you're going--no leaving the house at night--no male visitors--no liquor, drugs. There was an attorney affiliated with the house. You were to make arrangements for restraining orders before the seventh day--no need to leave the house--the attorney would come there.

What are your plans—do you have any plans? Now, there's the gist of the fuck-up, I suppose. Not a plan one when I left the day before, only to get away with the kids before he got home. Be packed and ready when I get home, Nathan had said that morning. I don't give a fuck where you go, but you ain't taking them kids. And you ain't staying here. What do you do? You got to one up him. A choice like that—nothing to do. You got to regain an ounce of control over the situation. Course the marks get you into the safe house, and thank christ for them, 'cause there's no where else, her parents off somewhere in a Winnebago—no childhood home left—they'd sold it for the Winnebago and given up their roots to go traveling about, playing host and hostess at camping resorts all over the country and into Canada. They wouldn't want to be bothered in their happy retirement by the likes of this. You wouldn't for the world bother them, either. Most of your friends are men you used to work with, men you and Nathan used to work with, and they were sure to take his side and you couldn't just go off living with some man who might take you in, Sayward, not with the kids and all. Course, the lady here says put him out, the courts will give you the house, you've got the kids to raise. But it's his house, you tell her, his grandmother's old place—can't be right to take over his grandmother's old place. And if you did, if by chance you talked yourself into doing something that low, the place is fifteen miles out in the boondocks—how the hell do I get back and forth to work everyday with that gas guzzling monster out front and its bald tires—and how do I keep insurance on it—with the kind of job I can get, my back busted and all, not being able to work a man's job anymore—I'd be working minimum wage, you can bet, just enough to pay the child care for watching the kids while I work. Then how am I suppose to pay the electric bill and get food and lady don't talk food stamps to me, don't go there. He'll have to pay child support, the lady interrupts. He'll have to make sure to keep insurance on the kids and you'll most likely get the house and he'll pay you child support. Then you look at her in her maize power suit with her little earrings to match and pumps sure to be leather and you know she hasn't got the foggiest, not the foggiest idea what Sayward is talking about. Lady, she says, we ain't got insurance to begin with. And it's all we can do to pay for what we got right now. We're just scraping along the bottom here. And you think he's supposed to be able to do all he's doing now, plus find himself a place to live? Look, I say to her, and here's Sayward now, making up her mind, knowing damn well what she's going to do when her seven days are up, you lose everything, maybe you end up like me, just scraping by. Maybe you won't wear that nice yellow suit and leather on your feet. Maybe you'll wear tennis shoes and jeans from K-mart and pull your kids out of that private school you probably got them in. Me, lady, us, me and Nathan—that's where we're at right now. Any lower down, any harder than that and we go to stealing what we need. Got me? She didn't get me. Just blagged on—there's government sponsored day care centers based on how much you make—there's government sponsored housing—there's welfare, for christ sake, there's Medicaid. Give me

a fucking break. Like any of it's a choice to make. You don't choose that shit, fuck sake. You're shoved into it—it's not a viable option. Leave a home in the country for the projects? Put your kids in free day care? Choices, my ass.

Course, Nathan, he's got the advantage—he knows it. He's got a place, he can make the money. He can provide. Only once in my life could I say that—only once has Sayward felt on top of things—and that's when Nathan taught her to weld. Then we worked the construction hotsheet over as a team. I did the spot welding, he did the pure burn. We worked up high, 'cause the heights didn't bother us, and you're safer there, you know, no one dropping shit on you from above, no one pissing on you. And for eight months, it felt good, going home tired as Nathan, bringing home a paycheck equal to Nathan's, fucking proud I was to hear him say I could keep up with the best of 'em out there, light on her feet walking them beams in the air, ever see anybody walking tip-toe 'cross a beam in Red Wings? he'd ask about and point to her. Never seen nothing like it. And christ, they could fuck those nights, tired as they were, they went at each other, and teased each other up on the beams by day. He'd come up behind her, ten floors up they'd be, press her against a steel column and rub against her till the entire crew on the ground was whistling and hollering up at them. He'd reach around front and squeeze her breasts through her coveralls and she'd reach behind and grab his ass. The supervisor would break up the audience on the ground and shout up to them to save it for when they got home—they weren't getting paid to fuck around on the job. Then at home, the kids in their room asleep, they fucked with the same intensity they'd felt ten floors above the ground, fucked like they had a fucking audience.

But that was forever ago. Before the fall. And now you're fucking stretched on the edge of a super-size cot with the kids, in the barest of houses, a nice house, but nothing homey 'bout it, with one small toy box full of broken toys that the kids are already bored with, a small shelf of books with pages missing and pages scribbled on, and you with insomnia from day one, waiting for the morning, day seven, so you can make your call, tell the man your coming home, but things have got to change. He should be 'bout ready to buckle by now. Six days and nights, no word from you, no word 'bout you or the kids, wondering maybe if he'll ever see you again. He should be past the anger now. Should be into that sort of numb, weepy stage. Should be ready to break. And Sayward, you got to do it, got to break him every now and then, 'cause if you don't, he gets too big, too damn tough-hearted to even touch. Tomorrow night we'll sleep together again. He'll want me, maybe as much as he used to before the accident.

It's the fucking fall that ruined it all and, sure, you tried to sue the sons-a-bitches, but they blamed the thing on Nathan and then banned husband-wife teams from working together as if the whole thing was the result of a distraction. But really it was my own fault, a slight forgetfulness on my part. Nathan and I were working cross the beams, eighty feet up, cutting across from one to another over a thick plank of plywood. It meant latching on with your safety harness and disconnecting again every time you had to move back across a beam. It was a lot to remember. And Nathan and I shared that plywood. Sometimes he had to move it to cross to a different beam. When I fell, he'd just moved the plywood. I knew it, had seen him do it, but didn't remember till that one foot was out there in the air and then it was too late. I'd disconnected to move across to Nathan and then I was free falling. I was lucky really, could have fallen the whole eighty feet, could have burst open like a ripe watermelon on the concrete below, but I landed into an empty scaffold on top of a bucket about twenty feet down and swayed back and forth on there till they lifted me down in a basket using the crane. Then came back surgery—a broken vertebra, but no spinal damage—wiring the pieces of bone back together. Then therapy with the motto “chase the pain, but don't catch it.” And pain pills that made me want to sleep all the time. And hired help to watch the little ones while I recuperated. And we ate through the savings then and sold the boat. Three months later, here comes Sayward's medical release—can return to work—light duty. That means tool shed attendant, fire watch maybe, front dispatcher. It meant squat. There isn't a construction site in the world you can work on once you answer that little question on the application that says have you ever received an injury to your back. End of me doing man's work. End of me doing anything that will make a decent living—the classic non-skilled American female fuck-up—dysfunction to follow. Then the law suit fell through after the lawyer had Nathan full of hope for a settlement close to five-hundred

thousand. Fuck it. A man spills hot coffee all over himself and gets millions. I spill from eighty feet up and get squat. Story of Sayward's life.

It was also the end of great fucking as far as Nathan was concerned. Not that I couldn't, or that I can't, but Nathan kept running into new limitations and it hindered him. Couldn't do the grind any more, the slow belly grind atop him, just couldn't get her back flexible enough for it, with him reaching and squeezing her small breasts in his hands, pinching her pips till she winced and smiling at her, biting his bottom lip, all tough, giving all to Sayward, sweaty, strong Sayward, the old Sayward, full of sex, bring it on she was, but she couldn't bear it now, not that, nor the way he fucked her with her knees bent and pressed against her breasts, her feet on his chest, holding the drunk bastard steady while he slopped in and out of her, fucking acrobats they were, but fuck, she wasn't Gumby, you know, she couldn't limber up to it is all, christ, what fucking difference it makes, it made, for them though. Ah, but she'd liked it, that wide meaty chest, her wee painted toes pressing into him there, the cool drops of sweat that would fall from his hair to pool on her belly, the feeling of being racked, his weight pinning her tight, the way he'd growl, growl loud like a grizzly when he came, one long fucking growl and christ she loved that moment, Sayward craved that moment and she never ever wanted to share that kind of moment with anyone else but him since him. No, only him, you really, really only want to fuck him, all these years and christ he knows every inch of Sayward, he does, knows how her body works, and you think about him not being happy with you anymore, you know, you think about all these things, but you can't help but think it, the way you have to guzzle him down your throat just to bring him to life now, Sayward rubbing about, long smooth legs, up and down against him, rubbing just so against him, just so he'll feel a nipple stiff or feel Sayward wet, Sayward needy, and for what use christ sake, 'cause she'll have to do it, have to resort to it, the long winded guzzling act, guzzle, fucking guzzle, just to feel him hard, and christ the chore of it, the fucking jaw-ache of it all, but what gets you is that it used to do with just a leg, the smooth fucking leg and shit the times you've come out the bath and had the iron waiting you—no guzzle, no leg, just fucking anticipation. But that was before and what's done is done and I can't change that. What's there to do?

You sit up slowly in the bed, and move to the door. The black girls are giggling from the den and you smell the pot burning. They see me come out and roll their eyes. Look at them looking at me and them all dressed up in tight dresses, the cleavage blooming above the necklines. What time is it, I ask, and the bossy girl says its about time to go and she and the quiet one slip off the love seat, snub out their joint and head to the door. I look at my watch. Two a.m.. Late start tonight, ladies, I say, and the door shuts behind them. Every night, the same thing. You can't figure the deal with them.

I grab my cigarettes off the counter in the kitchen. About out. Yeah, Sayward, time to go home. You know when you run out of cigarettes, girl, its time to go home. Five dollars in my pocket. Just enough gas to get there. Maybe you shouldn't call first. Maybe you should just show up. No, Sayward, you gotta call. He's gotta ask you to come back. You can't let on that you're gonna anyway. She goes out the back door, sits on the cool concrete step, a light bulb blazing above her head. She lights her cigarette. It ain't so bad. Maybe it'll be good again. There's a fogginess to the back yard around her, the grass needing to be mowed, a smelly garbage can beside the steps, the lid on the ground beside it. She walks down the steps, picks the lid up from the ground, and places it firmly on the trash can. That's better, now. Nothing worse than old stinky garbage. Another of those things not to tolerate on Sayward's great list. She walks into the yard a ways, the grass wetting her feet, and she balances on one foot trying to pinch up little pieces of grass with her toes. She takes the last puff of the cigarette, watching the smoke as it hits the foggy air. She shivers and turns to go back into the house. There's an explosion, and the feel of a hot nail catching the edge of her upper arm. She'd felt the gown tug across her arm. And the instinct to fall came right along with a sudden loss of balance, the coward's instinct to lay down. To not move. She heard a car start up and then she heard, clearly heard, a man speaking excitedly. And what Sayward heard was either Got her or It's not her and then the sound of the car shifting gears, first, second, third. Even before she lifted herself from the ground there, she was struggling for recall—Got her or It's not her? Which, dammit, cause it makes a fucking world of difference. And you decide on the last. It's got to be the last.

What a mess, it is, fucking blood running down off the tips of her fingers. Sayward, you've gone and done it this time, but no, it's not so bad, just like a bad cut is all, right across it went, thank god. Just hold the towel there a while; it'll be alright shortly. You change out of your gown, is what you can do now, and you wait. Wait for the crack of dawn and then you call and then you go home. Enough of this place. There's not one bit of hope in this place. Not one bit of hope in anything except going home. He'll be different now. It'll be good now.

At the first light of day, I do it—I call. One ring. That's all it takes for him to answer the phone and he's all baby, what are you doing to me, I've been dying here, fucking going nuts here, I didn't mean it, never meant for you to leave, christ, you know me better, don't you? Baby, shit, you gotta come home, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I can't make it without seeing my babies, I miss the hell out of my babies, and you, goddamn, what's going on in your mind? There you go, Sayward, getting nuts on me—fuck, baby, I love you. Damn, you know I love you.

And then, it'll be better, baby, yes, and I ain't fucking around, why the hell do you keep thinking I'm fucking around, I don't need nobody else, Sayward, you know that.

When the kids wake up, you tell him, you'll come home. You guess. And that is that and it was better than I ever thought. Broke him, you did, that attitude of his. The great balancing act's not so wopsided anymore.

Wake the little ones. Dress them. Where's your sock, Boo, I thought I had everything right here? Well, never mind then, never mind. You want to go see Daddy? Yeah! Let's go, c'mon, hustle, hustle, gotta hurry. Wash the faces. Brush the little bits of teeth. And you there, Sayward, you there in the mirror, you still got it, you do, and he'll hold you tonight. And maybe before tonight. Maybe even when you walk in the door.

You pull into the drive and park the car and he swoops up Boo and you carry the toddler and he can't say a word, not one thing, his lips are quivering just so, this big ox of a man with his lips trembling, and you want to kiss him, kiss him for the longest, longest time and at the door, he lets Boo in first and then takes the toddler in and tells Boo to take him in the living room, turn on the tv. And, now Sayward, he turns to you, just he and you on the porch outside the back door, and he reaches with a slow hand behind his back, tugging, and with a steady arm brings it out and to you, his 9mm, right up close to your forehead and with the other hand, he grabs a handful of hair in back of your head. Down, Sayward, fucking down you go, on your knees, you will never do anything like that to me again, you hear, and you're sure the gun is cutting into your forehead, you've never had anything pressed into your head quite that hard before. And for about twenty seconds you think he's absolutely capable of pulling the trigger. Don't fuck up, Sayward, don't do one single thing to fuck-up. But there's nothing else to do—I reach up and with the back of my hand, I press softly on his extended arm, smiling at him, and the gun doesn't press as hard against my forehead. With my other hand I touch the side of his leg feeling his calf muscle tense under his jeans. I reach up to his belt and hook my fingers over it and pull hard to stand back up and he's letting me, got his fingers in my hair, still pulling downward, but he's letting me up and that's all I need. 'Cause you're fucking strong you are, fucking bulletproof, don't mind that the knees are weak as noodles. Up, and wrap the arms around his neck, that thick neck, hot on your lips, the shoulders solid. You will never do that to me again. No, Nathan, never. I would never. And look at him now all broke, all leaning on Sayward, crushing the air out her with his arms.

Judy Wilson is originally from Virginia. She spent the decade of the '90s in the deep South, first wrapping up her Ph.D. at The University of Southern Mississippi under the tutelage of the Barthelme brothers and Mary Robison, and then serving as the Director of the Alabama Center for Literary Arts. Currently, she is the Director of Creative Writing at Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall, Minnesota. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various publications including the *Southern Literary Festival Anthology*, *Skylark Literary Annual*, *Mississippi Review*, *Der Brennende Busch*, *Product*, *Antietam Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly's Atlantic Unbound*, *Caprice*, *Urban Pioneer*, *Reed Magazine*, *Out of Line Anthology*, *Oregon Literary Review*, *Buffalo Carp*, *Carve Magazine*, *Front Porch Journal*, *Farming Words* and others. She has received a number of awards for her fiction including the Southern Literary Festival Award for Best Short Fiction, the Joan Johnson Writing Award, the Henfield Foundation's Transatlantic Review Award, and the Truman Capote Fellowship.