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Disobedience

By Jane Hamilton

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Like many teachers, I sometimes find myself sitting across from a young person seeking advice about a relationship in ill health. As that adviser role consists largely of helping the student listen to him- or herself, I often ask: "Do you like the person you are in this relationship?"

If 38 year old Beth Shaw in Jane Hamilton's sensitively observed new novel were asked that of her marriage, her honest answer would be, "Very much, but something essential is missing."

Almost every character in this book could understand that answer, since each suffers the same dilemma: how to live in the world they find themselves and still fulfill their romantic longings.

For Beth, what is missing--despite the love and fidelity of her high school history teacher husband Kevin--is bodice-ripper romance, a white knight fantasy becoming real life.

To achieve that kind of ethereal music, the pianist Beth must turn to violinist Richard Polloco, slipping off from Chicago to Polloco's Wisconsin home for illicit trysts. But then, it isn't Beth who has this affair. It is Liza38, her email screen name, the forbidden exotic self craving gratification.

That's who Beth's son, 17 year old Henry, discovers on the computer screen at the novel's beginning. As he reads their illicit email, the high school senior narrates the tale, showing us through his eyes Liza38's clandestine romance with Rpoll, and capturing much of the texture of our world in the process.

Therein lies the extraordinary artistry of this novel. From its startling opening to its hauntingly beautiful epilogue, Hamilton shows once again the combination of large heart and cool detachment that suggests she is in our culture but not of it, knows it but does not aspire to it. She shows a negative capability, the quality Keats so lauded in Shakespeare, that resists easy answers, eradicates her own ego and enters completely into her characters.

Henry moves the plot at glacial pace, guiding our attention away from where actions will lead toward what is being transformed inside all members of the Shaw family. He proves both a typically confused adolescent with his own problems and a young man of unusual empathy.

He senses his mother can't go where many women can to live their alternate lives vicariously: her daughter. That daughter offers slender ground on which to build a gilded love life. Now 13, Elvira had made it long clear she "was never going to be a girl who is anxious to please, who obediently colors inside the lines and sits quietly on the rug during story hour." Elvira has her own fantasy, the hardly conventionally feminine wish to be a Civil War reenactor, and joins an all-male troop masquerading as Elvira Shaw of the 11th Illinois. For this, Beth blames her history teacher husband.

Henry adores his father, thinks him the "most big-hearted person" he's ever known, yet he also concedes his mother's need to dream. Henry longs quixotically for the past too. He wishes he lived in the fifties, wishes he were a Cold War spy, wishes his English class didn't read contemporary work but *Hamlet* and the *Orestia*, "works about mothers driving their sons crazy."

In some ways, Henry is Hamlet without the desire for revenge. He can more easily picture his mother with Richard than with his father. To whatever extent Freud's most idolatrous student Ernest Jones was right--that *Hamlet* is a study of the Oedipal conflict--Henry shares the prince's dilemma that someone has taken the role he coveted with his mother, replacing his father. A psychic even tells Beth that Henry once had that role, that in a former life she'd been married to him.

Though he deplores his mother's infidelity, Henry learns from it. He sees in Liza³⁸ and Rpoll's email "what a woman would like," and this aids in his own love affair with a blonde named Lily. His tremulous teenaged self-image causes doubt: "Why should [Lily] want me to touch her? I was not handsome; I was quiet, witty only sometimes, and usually under my breath. I knew useless things."

But Lily knows useful things, which she teaches Henry in bed. "Lily was the kind of girl any geek should be lucky enough to have for a first experience. More than lucky: her attention was on the order of divine visitation. She ... made me think that I was the one, that I was a dude, the big moment Henry she had always wished for. Without very many words and in less than eight hours ... she had given me a fantastical version of my own self."

Thus, wheels keep coming full circle, since, like Beth, Elvira and Henry, most of us seek that version of ourselves, the one that's been missing from our lives no matter how fulfilling otherwise. Beth's affair provides the chance at a new self that her marriage does not. To borrow from a superb Anne Sexton poem, Kevin as husband has been solid "as a cast-iron pot" while Richard has been the dream-fulfilling luxury, "Littleneck clams out of season."

But where will it lead? Although Henry's narrative moves like a stroll through the woods more intent on learning the texture of the forest than arriving somewhere, the question looms: will this infidelity destroy a marriage?

We have our expectations about that. Even Beth had told us, "This is an old story. There is nothing new in it." But she is wrong. Jane Hamilton makes every story new, even the classic story on which our nation was founded, that we can take our brushes, bravely paint a new scene and step in.

Fittingly, but with twists far outside our expectations, Hamilton uses the unlikely Elvira to spark the denouement, this mother-daughter relationship that can provide Beth a mirror, the father-daughter ground on which a white knight can ride in, to create a depth and charity strong enough to stare down the deepest pains and offer the possibility of hope.

In her most sophisticated novel to date, one of the most perceptive writers of our time shows how we are all spun of a mingled yarn, good and ill together, and that whatever judgment we render on each other may also fall on us.