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THE NIGHT IN QUESTION

By Tobias Wolff

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Reviewed by Andy Solomon

When we learn to find the miraculous in the everyday, we soar above the billions who find it only in the extraordinary.

Tobias Wolff's fiction soars that way.

After two brilliant memoirs detailing his boyhood and Vietnam experience, Wolff returns to the short fiction form that established his eminence over a decade ago. In story after story, with a hand light and deft enough for neurosurgery, he takes a common experience--an adolescent love triangle, a wish to protect a daughter, a family beside a fireplace, a nervous laugh--and carves from it powerful drama and elemental emotion.

These magnificent stories illuminate moments of recognizable truth from unexpected angles of vision. In "Mortals," a bottom-rung journalist finds himself the victim of our common fantasy of returning to attend our own funeral, after he's written the obituary of a man who hasn't died. In "Sanity," a mother-to-daughter lecture about sexual longing and ego needs teeters over the irony that the girl understands these things far more than her sociologist mother and psychologist father, as the mother describes the father's fetishes while they drive to the psychiatric hospital where he's a patient.

Wolff writes with particular assurance about the confusions and conflicts of adolescence, the time that "opened up the view of a world I had only begun to suspect, where wounds did not heal, and things did not work out for the best." In the wistful "Smorgasbord" two prep school boys sample a smorgasbord of lusts and vulnerabilities over spring break. At one point, reeling with lusty infatuation for a classmate's stepmother, the narrator is urged to look at a girl his age: "rosley raised his eyebrows at me. I raised mine back, though my heart wasn't in it. She was a Viking dream, pure gemutlichkeit, but I was drunk on Garcia's stepmother and in that condition you don't want a glass of milk, you want more of what's making you stumble and fall."

"Powder" is a short but ingratiating tale of a boy's day with his charming and funloving father, soon to be divorced from his mother. Dead-accurate characterizing touches reveal why the man is a husband impossible to live with and a father impossible not to love.

In "Firelight," which both in tone and subject feels like a lost chapter of Wolff's *This Boy's Life* (and which contains the most piquant description of a haughty academic since Jane Smiley's *Moo*) a boy and his struggling but irresistible mother search for an

apartment while Wolff scatters around them beautifully layered images of both harmonious and frustrated family life.

Wolff's descriptive prose resonates like a struck bell. A soldier in Vietnam "didn't think he had killed anyone yet. His company had been ambushed three times and B.D. had fired back with everyone else, but always hysterically and in a kind of fog. Something happened to his vision; it turned yellow and blurry and he saw everything in a series of stuttering frames that he could never afterward remember clearly."

A house in "Two Boys and a Girl" tries too hard: "the pictures, the matching Colonial furniture, the single bookshelf full of condensed books. It was like a house Russian spies would practice being Americans in."

Wolff drives to the heart of character, like the posturing teacher whose students felt "we were supposed to get the impression that when we weren't around he turned into someone interesting, someone witty and profound, who uttered impromptu bon mots and had a poetic vision of life," or the woman in "Lady's Dream" who's Southern, "but a particular kind of Southern. Not trash, as she would put it, but too proud of not being trash."

For power used cruelly and competitively, what might be more succinct than this from "Life of the Body": "Monique,... a French teacher on exchange, a tall jaunty Parisian who humiliated the boys in her class by mimicking their oafish accents, and the girls by rendering them invisible to the boys."

While Wolff's most striking characterizations deflate sham and self-importance (even, I must note with some terror, to the point of killing off a book critic in one story, "Bullet in the Brain"), he can also paint pure shades of benevolence, like this boy in "Firelight" warmed by the sight of genuine love: "The little I'd seen of marriage had disposed me to view public affection between husbands and wives as pure stagecraft-- Look, this is a home where people hug each other--but she was so plainly happy to be where she was that I couldn't help feeling happy with her."

It has been said of Leonardo's canvasses that you cannot see the brushstrokes. From cover to cover here, Tobias Wolff cushions a reader in language and insight so unobtrusively natural that their effect lingers and expands, like gems dropped dead center in the pool of our common humanity.