*The Absence*

By Nicholas Dighiera

Honey, tell me a story, she says.

 He grumbles and ruffles his newspaper like he’s shaking dust off of it. His thick, grey moustache twitches from side to side before he says, We’re too old for stories, aren’t we?

 She takes a drag from her thin menthol and uncrosses her legs, recrossing them opposite. The smoke oozes out of her lips and floats into the wobbling ceiling fan. She scratches the liver spots on her forearm and runs her cigaretteless hand through her gray hair. She says nothing.

 He folds the paper to a new page and plucks the mug of Old Grandad from the kitchen table and sips it, sucking brown drops from the tips of his whiskers.

 The final shafts of sunlight slicing through the kitchen window die out. Clear, cool night descends. The water heater in the utility closet click, click, clicks until a low whoosh is heard; then comes the pinging of heat expansion.

 She says again, Tell me a story. Please.

She flicks ashes into an empty mug and then stares at the shield of paper he’s holding up.

 He lowers the paper and looks at her wrinkled face and neck, her lips like a cinched purse. He reaches up and rubs the pate of his bald head. He says, Can’t I just read the paper? I just want to read the paper. Can’t you read a book or something? They’re filled with stories. Read a book or something.

 She looks away from him and faces the window. A drop falls from the faucet into a soiled dish in the sink and she touches the grace of her neck. Two beams of yellow light pierce the dark, travelling along the invisible road beyond the yard, continuing into the distance as harsh red dots.

 She is dead silent while he reaches out and takes another sip from the mug. He futzes with the collar on his shirt before ruffling the paper back up to view.

 She pulls her robe tight, accidentally knocking ash onto the floor.

 Muted honking can be heard from a wedge of geese flying south in the night sky.

 Nice night, she says. Quiet.

 He looks out the window and says, Might get cold tonight. Weatherman was saying something about that, the cold.

 Yeah, she says. The cold.

 He lays the paper down on the table, taking time to fold it as it was delivered. He smooths the sheets, but when there are no more wrinkles there he smooths the backs of his meaty hands.

 They both watch the darkness outside. Another car passes by, this one with a missing headlight. Out in the yard the branches of the cottonwood clack together in the slight wind.

A flashing light crosses the star-pocked sky and she says, A satellite?

 Could be an airplane or something, he says, still smoothing his hands.

 She takes another drag, really pulling it in. The end of the cigarette crackles a cherry glow.

 Yeah, she says, and then blows the smoke out of the corner of her mouth. She drops the smoldering butt into the empty mug and opens the pack of smokes on the table. She snags one from the box and brings it to her lips, flaring the lighter to life, slightly cross-eyed while she directs the flame to the tip. Again she pulls large, discharging the smoke around the room.

 They sit this way for some time, he smoothing, she smoking.

 And then, a drop falls from the faucet again, but she does not hear this because he says, The only stories I know are about our little girl.

 She tilts her chin up, jutting it out and holds the cigarette in her upturned hand.

The man is still smoothing his hands. He hasn’t looked up since he spoke. He doesn’t look up now.

I’m sorry, he says.

She leans to his side of the table, takes his mug, and pours the rest down her throat. The cup clanks as she sets it on the table.

She turns to face him but can only see the thin skin on the top of his head and she says, I don’t want a story anymore.

I know, He says.

She turns back to the window. He too. And the night moves slow like this, each passing second ushering them further into the darkness.