

The Expendables



"Nelson pries at the tight and awkward knots of relationships, getting into places where tenderness and need are buried. Her eye is unflinching and her narrative touch subtle and precise."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*



ories

of
Girl

Antonya Nelson

The Expendables

Stories by Antonya Nelson

Scribner Paperback Fiction

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For Susan and Julie,
and for Robert and Jade



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Listener

"Why did you stop?" her husband asks. His hand had lifted, as it did involuntarily, while she was reading, but as soon as she'd quit it had dropped back into his lap, lifeless. "Julia?" he says, and though his hands are both peacefully draped on his lap, his voice holds the most minor of tremors, perhaps perceptible only by his wife. "Julia, is there something . . . ?"

"It's just that man again."

Averil's hand rises when he hears her voice. It flits to his collar, to his ear, his nose, a pattern his hand has etched into any space Averil inhabits. He is blind, and when he hears his wife's voice, when his hand senses her voice on the air, he must check the other senses rapidly. He is here, they seem to tell him, he fills a shirt, a body; he can enclose himself with his hands.

"Next door?" he says, gently.

"Across the way." Not an alley, just a brief ten-foot space between windows. "I can't get used to apartments," she says, rising to pull the shades. The room shrinks, the light dulls. "But I can't stand his being out there. He just sits on his bed and . . ."

"And what?" Averil has a smile on his lips, his face and hand following her voice in their own bedroom to the windows, back to the rocker.

"And he listens."

"You read well. You have a lovely voice for reading, and I'm

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sure he only wants to hear." He crosses his long legs on the bed, fluffs the feather pillows behind him, rubs his temples with his slender fingers. The only part of him he cannot maneuver to his liking is his hair, which triumphs wildly on his head, thick and brown, a few gray strands rising even more mutinously above the rest, coarse and cantankerous. He has the ruffled yet refined look of an eccentric scholar, a chess player in the park, a musician.

"He annoys me," Julia says. She adjusts her magnifying eyeglasses and returns to *Jude the Obscure*, but it is not the same as before. She is self-conscious. While she reads, she begins wondering what the man heard, if he heard her voice take on the personalities of Jude and Arabella, if he heard them slaughter their pig. Now her voice is lower, her chair closer to Averil, her fingers flipping through on their own to find the end of the chapter.

After *Jude*, she reads him some short stories. He doesn't like them as well; they end too quickly, he says. He likes to go on and on. He loved *Anna Karenina*. He never wanted the party to end. But Julia enjoys the short stories and the poems. She can read them twice in one evening if she wants. If they were powerful, she can recast their spell easily. And Averil does have his own books. It isn't as if he must depend completely on her.

The man across the way, however, is still a problem.

She and Averil moved in only a month ago. From Kansas. Julia's new Chicago job, a surprise transfer, paid so much more they couldn't afford not to move. They'd always been strapped for money. For a while, Averil had had to sell cosmetics over the phone. No amount of love for their house in the country could compete with the money she would make. Their move was simple; they hired a van line, had the condominium painted, the floors sanded, the locks changed, before

they ever arrived. Julia had only to stand in the hallway and direct the men. "In the study . . .," she would say, "in the bedroom, . . . down in storage," and their furniture glided into new places, filling available space. She led Averil through the rooms. His hands, clumsy and out of sync with his body in the new rooms, sought the familiar objects of their lives: the smooth round oak table he'd sanded himself, a cold marble vanity stand, the hairy surface of his recliner where his cat Sophie slept, was now sleeping.

It took him no time at all to adjust to the layout. The noise was different. Sirens still startle him in the night. Helicopters and human voices can make him clutch Julia, whose heart leaps for him. It is only then, blackness surrounding both of them, together in a shared blindness, that she mistrusts their judgment. Moving was not good, she thinks. We have done the wrong thing. In these moments she feels anything could happen, that she has so little control in the world that nothing, no place, is safe.

But Averil relaxes, slips into sleep trustingly. His breath against her throat is sweet, not like an adult's but like a child's, clear. His faith in her can calm her; if he trusts her, she must be trustworthy.

Of course, when fall and winter come the windows will be closed. The storm windows will be on, the new drapes hung to insulate even further. It isn't as if they couldn't, even now, close up the windows. They can afford air conditioning. They can afford thin metal blinds that allow light without eyes. But Julia loves air, fresh air. She loves sunlight, even cloudlight, cool and wet. Perhaps because she has lived with Averil for so long, she doesn't bother with much electric lighting. She reads by a soft bulb at night. The rest of the apartment is dark. Light from the window means, for Averil, weather, elements, heat, gradation. It seems unfair to deny him those, to bathe

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him in the mute hues of electricity and civilization. And so Julia refuses to bow to the man in the window. He doesn't bother Averil; of course, Averil can't see him as he sits on the bed, head turned, listening. His room is dark but a light from the hall cuts an angle of pale yellow that shows him in shadow. He is black, muscular, listening.

Averil has never seen. Anything. Julia still cannot, after ten years of trying, imagine such a world. The great unfairness is that he would be so good a looker at things, so attentive, given the chance. She sometimes strikes deals with whatever God exists: give him sight and I'll give up my feet (my hands, my voice, ten years of my life). Give him sight for a day and I'll give up all our money. Give him sight and I'll give him up.

But what a shock it would be, at forty-four, to suddenly be endowed with a new sense. It would not be the same as taking one away, which is all Julia can think to compare it to. It might be as if she one day woke up clairvoyant, possessing the sixth sense. But if that were so, everyone she knew or met would be tragic, their lives spilled open before her. A mixed blessing.

Sophie cat escapes one day while Julia is working. Averil, when he phones her, can hardly speak. She hears him bang his palm on the table. "I've called her and called her, but she doesn't know where she is." His voice sounds as if someone is choking him, forcing him to speak.

"Was it the back door or the front, Ave? Is she in the building or not?"

For a moment he says nothing. Surely he can remember that? For what must be the millionth time, Julia tries to put herself in his mind; how does the world right itself once it has been jumbled? Is it lining up, like numbers? Is it returning to mass, like mercury?

"The back. She's outside, of course. Would I be this upset if she were still in the building?" He then hangs up on his wife.

When Julia arrives home minutes later (she is amazed at how easy it is to leave work—no one to answer to), Sophie is sunning on the rear brick wall of the building, her tummy exposed, back rubbing against the stone. Julia grabs her so tightly the cat lets out a small breathless squeal. She fights valiantly but Julia's anger is bigger, stronger. They both cease when they hear Averil, standing at the door, at the top of the second flight of stairs. "Kitty, kitty, Sophie, Sophie," he says in a voice that doesn't care who is listening.

Julia drops Sophie to the ground not fifty yards from her husband and backs up. Sophie runs without hesitating between his legs, into the kitchen. Averil pauses a moment, still holding the door with one hand, his free hand in the air, as if he's heard Julia. He cocks his head, then slowly shuts the screen door. "Sophie," Julia hears him say. "Come here, old girl." The other, heavy inner door shuts, leaving her alone. She watches Averil through the window, which is so high she can see only the top of the refrigerator opening and closing. Sophie will get a treat.

When Julia turns, her heart calming, tears of relief forming in her eyes, she faces the man from the window, coming up the steps.

"Excuse me," he says, and her heart immediately stutters back to life, her tears disappear. He keeps his deep cow-brown eyes on hers, his gym bag held away from himself to navigate around her. He passes, jogging to his back steps, skipping every other one on his way up.

Milton is off limits. Not by Averil's insistence, but his wife's. She cannot shake the poem that leaves the poet dreaming of the sight of his own wife in his blindness, waking to darkness, to the interminable nightmare.

"It's powerful for everyone, Jule," Averil will tell her, annoyed. "You haven't cornered the market on responding to it,

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you know." But even *Paradise Lost* leaves her unsettled, though Averil loves Satan's logic.

At home, Averil makes friends with the retired cop upstairs. They share a love of railroads; the man has a set replicating the Southern Pacific line running through his apartment, a computer terminal to regulate bridge droppings, grain loadings, rail changes. Averil now sometimes wakes at night laughing, hearing the squeaky hoot of a tiny engine through their bedroom ceiling.

Julia heats with protective love for Averil when she thinks of him trying to explain his own love of trains to the cop. She can only imagine it; she would never ask, "How did you tell him you love the motion, the thrumming through your body as the train picks up speed, the snaking out into the landscape?"

"Right," the cop in her mind answers, smiling behind his hand. But of course that isn't the way it is; nothing is ever rendered quite itself in speculation. Averil's cop perhaps nods emphatically, saying he knows precisely how Averil feels, the lulling of the wheels, groove to groove with rail, the homey enclosure of one car, then the next, the crossing between them, suspended between warm worlds, each smelling peculiarly of train, of trainness—leather, smoke, oil, wool, men traveling.

Averil and the cop, Frank, ride the El into the city often, sometimes simply riding the Loop route and coming back without getting off. Friday's Express conductor knows them. The cop tells stories from his years on the force. They ride once into the Southside and Averil can tell the difference when the doors slide open, the new tension, the cooking odors that float in at every platform. Donuts, Thai food, pizza, popcorn. His coat and hair, when he returns, have collected the city's odors the way they used to collect the country's, woodsmoke and snow.

"Are you happy here?" she asks him over dinner.

"I'm surprised to say that I am," he tells her, sipping his wine carefully. He collects wine, attends tasting events at a liquor store a few blocks away. Behind him on the counter is a beautiful rack of bottles, their colors pale and floral in the room.

"You ask as if you aren't happy here yourself," he says to her. "Are you?"

"Your bottles are very pretty in this light," she says, momentarily satisfied with the room, their new life. "I guess I'm happy. I miss our yard."

"I miss the land, too. I miss exploring without worrying about getting lost. But I'm getting better. I feel comfortable in this neighborhood and downtown. It's good to have the library near."

"I think you could be happy anywhere."

He pauses a long moment. "That's possible."

Strangely, it bothers her to know he is adjusting to the city, to know that when he wakes in the night he now laughs instead of grabbing her in terror, to know that he depends on her less. She wonders at her motives in marrying Averil. Did she really want a child instead? A man unlike other men, one who followed her lead without having a real choice? Before Averil, her relationships with men ended just at the point she felt herself losing control. Or, to be more exact, at the point when the men no longer relinquished control. They would withdraw, always assuming Julia would follow, concede, thereby balancing the power. Both parties would have leverage, these men seemed to argue. But Julia would surprise them by also withdrawing. Permanently.

Yet she did not seek out passive men. In fact, it was Averil's argumentativeness that first attracted her. She'd signed up for a classics seminar at the University of Kansas one fall more

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than eleven years ago, and Averil had been the most vocal student there, arguing incessantly over interpretations and critics. Eventually the professor, a stunningly sexy young woman, had had to ask him after class to quit interrupting and allow her to teach. "If you could see her," Julia said to him then, walking him to the campus bus that night, "you wouldn't be able to disagree with her."

"So you're saying sight's a hindrance, in reality?" He'd laughed, smoothing his face with his broad hand as if to control more laughter. Later, Julia discovered it was a gesture to ensure there wasn't food left on his chin or mustache. "Or are you saying that most men are led by their genitals and not their heads?" he said. "I hadn't thought of what an advantage I must have. But where are the hordes?" He'd spread his arms, white cane bouncing in the air. "There must be hundreds of liberated women waiting for such a man." The campus was empty, a strong fall wind swaying the trees. His hair, in the streetlight, mussed itself into a variety of patterns. He seemed to be looking just above the campanile on the next rise, just at the point where a fat, almost perfect harvest moon rose. Julia loved him then, suddenly and without hesitation.

When his bus pulled up, moments later, he boarded still smiling, and when he sat down he waved directly at Julia, confident she was still there watching him.

"I wouldn't be happy without you," he says, much later, from nowhere. "Perhaps that's obvious, but I wouldn't be here at all without you, let alone happy."

She doesn't respond, at least not in a way he can sense.

"Julia? Come here, please." His hands, both warm from his cup of hot tea, caress her face. "Sweet Julia," he murmurs, his thumbs pressed expertly underneath her eyes, smoothing the soft spots so that she won't cry.

She forgets about the man across the ten-foot space between the buildings after winter sets in. The cold arrives in a night; trees dump all their leaves in a single afternoon. Storm windows seal their apartment like a lid seals a jar. Occasionally, on rare sunny days, Julia snaps their bedroom blinds open. Always surprised by the proximity of the windows across from theirs, she stares into the space between. Brown bricks like prison walls. Upstairs, porcelain cats line the sills. Extravagant silk flowers in another window. She cannot explain the feeling she has seeing these things. Why not a real cat? Why not live flowers? The windows do not seem like those of living, breathing people, but windows for her own observation alone, scenic, art. Leaning close to the glass she can make out a gray strip of cloud above. Where does it end? Where does it begin? Weather here is not predictable, does not creep or slide across an enormous sky. Here, it is stark, immediate, surprising.

One of Averil's favorite pastimes in Kansas was predicting the weather. He knew when he woke what sort of day it would be—if his head hurt, there would be rain or snow before night. Or if there were a certain yellow smell in the air, a quality of the wind, he would know tornadoes were due. When he heard cicadas, drunk even at sunrise on the sound of their own noise, the day would be a still scorcher. The first day of spring or fall was never on its prescribed day, but always on the day when the wind shifted, took a hard turn; he explained to Julia that the birds used the high winds to travel north or south. Their coming and going was what really divided the seasons.

Across from her a shade snaps up. A black hand steadies it, pulls it down, tugging to line it up. Julia, in remembering her old home, standing at the windows there and watching the sky, is shocked motionless by the extraordinary contrast the window across from her makes. The second shade comes up,

is steadied, evened, a third. Julia lowers herself to the floor, eyes at the sill, watching. She sees a bed, a white chenille spread like the one she had when she was young, a rounded dresser, its wood drawers scalloped, a rocking chair, something—a poster, a painting, a flag—hanging on the far wall, bright colors against plain white. The room is precisely like her own in its floor plan, a mirror image, the door on her right mimicked by another door there. Both are open halfway. The man, after a brief glance in his dresser mirror—he squats leaning back, touches his short hair in little pats—steps through the half-open door into his hallway. Julia sees him without seeing him. He now goes to his kitchen, perhaps turns on the faucet, rinses a sponge, switches on a radio, peels an orange, sits at the table and reads his mail.

She opens her eyes. Four-thirty and the light has disappeared, the sun has already sunk behind some tall building to the west of her.

She knows Averil has noticed that the shades now are up almost all the time; he feels cool air radiate from the windows. He doesn't ask her but sometimes stands before them, tracing the colder air with his palms, squares of glass. Though it annoys her that his tact won't allow him to question her, she doesn't know how she would explain. She feels as if they are waiting for something, as if opening the shades will encourage its arrival. What is it? she wonders, lying on their bed, running her eyes again and again over the porcelain cats, the fake flowers.

Julia has had little practice observing other lives, spying, as it were. It surprises her to hear arguments from the apartment below, doors slamming and plaster trickling. When she retrieves her mail, other tenants' magazines must be sifted through to find her own. What curious tastes they have: the

faceless woman next door who receives endless catalogs for underwear and sex toys; baby magazines come for the fighting couple; and body-building ones for Frank, the retired cop. She meets them in the laundry room, dragging their dirty sheets from basket to washer to dryer, or in the parking lot when she and Averil go for a drive. They say hello and Averil answers, smiling, but Julia only nods, not quite meeting their eyes. Sometimes at night she looks at their lighted windows and tries to imagine their lives (stacked, she thinks of them, one on top of the other) from the brief bits of them she catches—a family around a table playing cards, a naked pregnant woman, standing in the light of an open refrigerator drinking from a milk carton.

The man (her man, she thinks, as if even fleeting familiarity with his habits made him known to her) directly across from their apartment is rarely home, or, at least, rarely in his bedroom. No one else is ever there. The bed does not go unmade. His shades are at half-mast except at night, when they are drawn and he is the bulky shadow that crosses them now and then.

When Julia lived in the country, fifteen minutes from Lawrence and the university, forty-five from Kansas City, it occurred to her only occasionally that she had no close friends. Her life with Averil, so far from great numbers of people, seemed naturally and comfortably isolated. The people they saw regularly—the Eudora rural postman, their neighbors whose cows sometimes found their way into Averil's cucumbers and tomatoes, Julia's officemates—were touchstones, places where an independent life met with a public one. But in a place as public as a city a lone soul stood out—not literally, for it was easy to be alone—but figuratively. Why, in a city of millions, Julia wondered, would one choose to be

alone? Even Averil, the epitome of self-sufficiency, had Frank upstairs.

Julia sits at her desk, staring at the blinking orange cursor on her computer terminal. *Who?* she types, then leans on the *o* and fills a few lines. *Robin?* she writes. On the other side of a transparent screen sits her secretary, listening to a terrible lunch hour radio show that Julia has made her turn off more than once. Robin is in her early thirties, a chatterer who likes to laugh. She's recently divorced, probably a little lonely herself, but something keeps Julia and her at a distance. It could be as simple as their relationship—employee and employer—but Julia doesn't think so. Robin has the kind of self-confidence that Julia is made shy by. When Julia interviewed her, Robin asked most of the questions. Why had Julia left Kansas? What did her husband do? Did she have children? This question wasn't meant unkindly, but it stung Julia nonetheless. She hadn't had to answer it for a few years, and her stock response was rusty.

"My husband and I have always been happy as a family of two," she told Robin, stiffening. But Robin wasn't willing, as most people were, to take the hint and back off.

"But husband and wife don't count as family," she'd said, practically pleading with her big blue eyes. "I mean, family means children. Don't get me wrong—I understand. My husband and I just got divorced because I wanted kids and my husband, ex-husband, thought like you. He thought the two of us were plenty." She'd laughed good-naturedly, and Julia had decided to hire her. Now, looking back, it was as if she had tried to introduce some new sensibility into her daily routine. With Robin only a partition away, perhaps a new outlook would rub off.

Robin gives advice easily, confidently, though Julia rarely takes advantage of it. Robin is quick to compliment clothing