

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

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Point Au View

"I AM TRAPPED IN A CAGE OF MY OWN MAKING AND DESIGN," I confess aloud in the stillness of the summer evening. The setting sun casts a shadow through the double-arched window in the room that I have used as an office for forty years. I become agitated over the loss of the daylight hours.

In the distance, a bluff overlooking the Ohio River surrenders dominion for a sojourn into darkness. If only negotiation and legal arguments were a viable option; the sun would rise again upon hearing my testament of jurisprudence.

"Come in" I say upon hearing a knock at my door.

It's only the maid who, noticing the dimming light, says softly "Ma'am asks you to please dress for dinner, as it's approaching the six o'clock hour." She leaves in haste.

A foul mood overtakes me as daylight finds its resting place. I strike a match to light the candle atop a pedestal stand, part of a desk set I received five years ago at my retirement celebration. I hope the beacon will lift my spirits this evening.

The swell of candlelight cascades across the leather inlay writing mat on my desk. I recollect the legal paper I was working on before I dozed off earlier and it lays before me as if on a stage, under a spotlight. I had begun my Last Will and Testament after yet another mandate by my wife, Karilla.

Karilla and I have settled into the mutual understanding that befalls most long marriages. We display a demeanor of subtle interest, depending on the topic of conversation. Fifty years ago, Karilla accepted my lukewarm proposal of marriage, but I didn't want her as my bride. Though she was a local beauty, with flaxen hair against porcelain skin and patrician features, she was one of a number of silly and spoiled young girls in Maysville society. I resented her for what

I perceived as a forced marriage. When I brought her home, I feigned every excuse before succumbing to the marriage bed.

"You know, Emery, my daughter Karilla's mighty sweet on ya' and I sure do need a good lawyer in town to represent my business interests. Whaddya say?" John Lamb, Karilla's father, never minced his words but got directly to the point in a conversation. This quality had served him very well in business and he usually got what he wanted. Now he would have me wed his daughter and I, starting out in the practice of law in the town of Maysville, Kentucky, dared not object.

As I muse, both desperation and anxiety overtake me. A deliberate hand, the fingers of which have begun to twist in on one another with the tinge of arthritis, reaches for the spectacles that rest upon several blank sheets of laid paper. Magnified by the powerful lenses in the spectacles, I gaze intently on the artificial language in the document, my final wishes at life's end dated today June 5, 1892, but the words strike me as obscure and unfamiliar. I stare at the paper as I trace the embossed pattern of the

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stationer's mark with my left index finger. Mine is a bitter reckoning, as I surrender to the unholy memories.

I oversaw the building of my estate during the blistering summer of 1855, as an epidemic of Cholera swept through the county and felled many a lesser man. I watched with a discerning eye as the double bricks were cast, cured, and then set with mortar. I traveled to a nearby quarry to personally select the limestone that was chiseled by an expert craftsman and applied to each window-head. A third story tower received the capstone for my own Grande Italianate design mansion on the estate that I would christen as Point Au View. Hand-carved mantels and curved stairway, ceiling medallions, and chandeliers would soon greet guests as they passed through the threshold of my home.

I enjoyed the role of taskmaster, as I spoke in demanding tones to the masons and woodworkers I had bound to the project.

"I'll have you all hauled in on charges and I'm the one to make em' stick too. I'll sue for breach of contract since I included a 'time is of the essence' clause in each of your contracts."

My words were delivered hastily, with the potency of youth. I excused my behavior with the knowledge of a rumor that the Yankee army would confiscate the almost-finished estate as a base hospital, if it remained empty.

As it should be, fate has dealt me a heavy hand. I feel punished for my life-long arrogance by failing health and the curse of old age. I avoid every mirror, choosing instead to remember my youthful face and figure. I labor to rise from my chair, then muddle across the room to the same window that acceded to the eventide.

The capacious estate sleeps as the moon looks down upon us in sullenness. I am acutely aware that I have outlived the original essence of my monument, *but these old bones remain significant to the relic*. I cannot quash all the might-have-beens of this life and am left to languish the days with my ever-present regret.

Wrath, anger, and hatred, were my constant companions in all dealings with my brother, Nelson. Though I was the namesake for our father, I was no favorite son. That honor was bestowed upon Nelson when we were both young. The kinship between my father and Nelson was as strong as a forged chain. I despise the memory of the day my father last acknowledged me as his son.

Lucy was six years old and a little sister to Nelson and me. Her auburn ringlets bounced on her shoulders as she skipped along the bank of Stoney Creek near our family cabin. She sang a made-up song as she hugged a well-loved, handmade rag doll she'd named Ruby Jane.

"Sing pretty birds and build your nests, you brighten every tree and bush!" repeated Lucy over and over as she delighted in her imagination and play.

I had a child's inability to control my anger toward Lucy. She was coddled by our parents and her mischievous nature was all but encouraged. At just ten-years-old, I sensed an inequity of affections toward me.

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Nelson and I took turns herding the livestock that thrived by foraging in the woodlands on our acreage. This was a chore that could last for hours and often into the evening. But I wanted to go to school and learn so I wouldn't have to farm like my father.

One particular day when it was my turn, I left Lucy alone by the creek so I could get a head-start on herding the livestock.

"Lucy you go on up to the house now, ya' hear?" I'd already turned to go as my words trailed behind me and were absorbed into the morning breeze.

"Me an' Ruby Jane an't ready yet." Lucy shouted back contentedly and unfazed.

I figured she'd soon wander back up to the cabin where our mother was busy keeping house. But what I saw on my first trip back with some of our sheep was entirely surreal. I came upon my brother and father pulling my drowned sister from Stoney Creek. My mother stood at the creek bank but then collapsed to her knees as she wept so severely she couldn't catch her breath. Ruby Jane floated next to one of the slick stones that created a meander-line the width of the creek, affording a rugged crossing to the opposite bank.

Though they never directly said so, my family blamed me for the tragedy of Lucy's death. I was cast off and sent to live with an aunt and uncle who owned the Eagle Tavern near the stagecoach stop. With my aunt and uncle, I attended school fairly regularly and I kept the ledger for the tavern to earn my keep. But I was haunted by the death of Lucy and the physical separation from my family.

And so it was when I, not quite thirty years of age, but already a prominent lawyer in the county, discovered certain disdainful information about Nelson's personal life.

"It's intolerable! You are the same selfish clout you have always been." I shouted as my temples throbbed. In spite of this affliction, I charged at my brother. Caught off-guard he stumbled back a few steps, and then fell to the floor. Inflicting kicks to his torso I yelled,

"Get out! Do not expect me to recognize your fallen woman or your baseborn children."

My anger hadn't waned when I rode to his home the following day to admonish Nelson about my influence in the county and my impending judgeship. The surname Whitaker would not accept the stain of his poor decisions and his illegitimate family would bear the last name of Rogers as an alias.

In the years that followed, from my second floor perch at my law office in the town square, I often saw Nelson's growing family with their mother, Elizabeth. They seemed dreadfully poverty-stricken, but remarkably content. My own daughter and sons were neatly dressed, well mannered, and showed no overt emotion in public, as befitted their station in society. I felt both animosity and envy as I looked down upon Nelson's poor bastards, with their simple ways, large dark eyes, gangly limbs, and unmatched ragged clothing.

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Soon enough, I counted five children in the brood as I concluded that my brother, while evidently virile, was inept at providing for their basic needs with his meager position as superintendent of the county poor house. I could have quietly, even anonymously, helped the family, but thought it best to allow them to find their own way in this world and not expect any handouts.

Yet I vividly recall having once sought out the five children while they played a game of tag by the old way-marking fountain in the center of town. They remained away from the general crowd and on the fringe of a Founder's Day celebration and I, as a newly elected senator for the district, delivered the speech for the opening ceremony on the courthouse steps. My speech, and the general excitement, had the crowd clapping and whistling and I remember feeling as if I were a great orator in commanding such a response.

"Three cheers for the town of Maysville." someone shouted from the first row of the packed assemblage, muffling my final words.

With my head held high I left the podium and made my way through the throng, all the while tipping my head in acknowledgement. At the end of the passage, I clearly saw the Rogers children together by the fountain. Curious for a closer look and the slightest contact, I approached to see whether they might know me as their relation, even as their uncle.

"What's your name?" I said to the youngest girl who was slightly built and seemed all of about seven years old. There was intelligence in the way she studied me with her wide eyes and penetrating stare.

"Cat's got her tongue, for sure. Her name's Anna, sir," said one of the brothers.

"And you are?" I said to the lad, my own nephew.

"My name's Nelson Rogers," he said, delivering the words with a natural aplomb and dignity.

I cringed and was taken aback by the reckless decision of my brother to allow that woman to name her son Nelson, possibly drawing attention to the child's parentage since the name was uncommon in the area. I again looked at the child named Anna who continued to examine me as if I were a new species she had discovered and sought to scientifically label. Attempting to break her silence, I pulled a Liberty dime from inside my vest pocket and gently placed it in her tiny hand. The silence broadened as all eyes examined the coin then awaited young Anna's measured response to the rare gift. Anna deftly turned on her heels, closed her eyes to make a wish, and then chucked the coin into the center of the fountain. Without a care, the children eagerly ran to some other point of interest, but again always on the fringe of the celebration.

As my thoughts return to the present, I am overcome with a sense of deep loss as I realize that the happiness of Nelson's children could have been a portion of my own happiness and a fond memory for me now.

Shame and heartbreak are whisked together and are now served to me in equal measure, as I raise my mottled, trembling left hand and flatten the clammy palm against my forehead.

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Though we could not enjoy the close relationship of bosom brothers, there remains a powerful personal connection between Nelson and me. I vigorously try to push this memory to the most impenetrable place in my mind and wish to wipe away the sorrowful history of this eternal bond.

It began when I, as senator for my district, voted for the incorporation of the Bank of Maysville and also a law allowing the county to take stock in turnpike roads in the Commonwealth. I failed to mention to my colleagues and constituents that I was part of a small investment group financing the bank. As president of the bank, and with my vast political connections, I would make sure the county borrowed the funds to make large stock purchases in the turnpike roads projects. Though I was unsure whether the turnpikes would be profitable, I knew the bank would do well with the stock sales since any citizen able to do so would certainly follow the lead of the county.

As my own greed overtook me, I even bargained away my own beautiful daughter, Belle.

"Why Henry Lloyd we've known each other a long time, haven't we?" then using another familiarity I continued "Your son's been one of the suitors of my Belle for near a year now. He'd make a fine son-in-law if he would see fit to take Belle as his wife." The words rolled off my tongue as though they'd been scripted, lying in wait to be spoken at just the right moment.

"Father, I don't love him and I won't marry a man I don't love" said Belle as the initial shock of her hastily arranged engagement wore off.

"Belle dear, the Lloyd family is very well established and wealthy. You will live in a fine home and be very well taken care of, never wanting for anything. Love will come in time. I'm afraid the subject is not open for discussion." I never once considered my daughter's delicate soul and tender spirit, but instead convinced myself she would soon come to accept the betrothal. The wedding announcement appeared in the local newspaper and mail sacks filled with notes of congratulations were delivered to our door.

Belle languished in solitude, as I watched an unlikely change from ethereal beauty to thin, almost gaunt, and entirely too pale. Karilla begged me to call off the wedding, but I had too much invested in the outcome. A fretful gloom descended upon the entire household and at the very sight of me, all eyes became downcast with the pretense of completing wedding arrangements. In the early evening, on the night that marked exactly one week before the wedding, I sat in the parlor leisurely cleaning out the stem of my favorite pipe when the door suddenly burst open.

"Come now!" repeated an ashen-faced Karilla before I realized we were in the wake of some terrible emergency.

In great haste I followed Karilla through a side door that leads to the rear of the estate where servants had gathered as they stared out to a distant, jutting bluff. Looking past the gathering and to a fixed point on the horizon, I saw a figure in a long, white billowing dress standing at the very edge of the bluff. My senses struggled to piece together the information at my disposal until I couldn't deny that the figure was Belle in her wedding dress. Minutes too late and paralyzed by the shock of the vision,

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we watched Belle slowly raise her arms to a soft, outstretched position at her sides. With no backward glance she fell forward, as if into welcoming arms instead of the hundreds of feet down into the bustle of the Ohio River.

The servants were immediately dispersed with a warning not to speak of the tragedy. I sent for a doctor to medicate Karilla until I could figure out the course of action. I quickly penned a note and dispatched my best horseman to carry it immediately to my brother. Nelson had an old flat bottom riverboat that could easily maneuver the inlets and banks of the vast river.

I kept watch over the bluff until the early morning hours, before the river traffic would begin. The boat came steadily forward, as Nelson worked the rudder and a companion, an old Indian from outside the county, controlled the gouger and direction of the boat. Together they searched several inlets near where Belle had entered the river. Soon enough, I saw the two men retrieve Belle's lifeless form and place it in the mid-section of the boat after covering her with a heavy blanket. Then Nelson looked up at me in a silent stare that effectively conveyed his pity, if not loathing, for me.

In my note to Nelson, I asked that he quietly bury Belle, his own niece whom he had never met when the breath-of-life filled her being, in the old, unnoticed area of the Maysville Cemetery. The next morning, for his help and secrecy, I delivered on my promise to appoint Nelson as a deputy sheriff and in six months I would see to it that he became the sheriff for the city.

I made an excuse for the cancelled wedding by declaring Belle with a bout of tuberculosis and she'd been sent west to recover. As the years passed, all questions about her absence ceased, the son of Henry Lloyd took another young woman from a fine family as his bride, and all appeared normal at the Point Au View Estate.

The many yet unspoken tales of my life seem now as strange affectations belonging to another and not to me, but together their grip leaves me swallowed whole in an abyss of terrible memories.

A mantle clock, ornamented with the scales of justice and set on the shelf containing my law books, strikes the half-hour chime. Immediately the sound jars my sense of time and place and my thoughts are now firmly fixed in the present. I remember the maid reminding me to dress for dinner and so, in the same muddled gait as before, I walk toward the desk to extinguish the ebb of the candle flame. In this gesture, I notice the papers on my desk and realize I was completing my Will to assuage Karilla's constant pestering. She'll be relieved to see the words 'I, Emery Whitaker, bequeath my entire estate, including the Point Au View mansion and acreage, in the event of my death, to my wife, Karilla, to dispose of as she so chooses'.

I slowly shuffle the documents into a loosely organized stack and expect to have one of my sons witness the document in the next few days.

Suddenly, I am light hearted as my spirit guides me in my effort to right the wrongs I have committed. After dinner I will return to my study

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and begin the only penance that I am entitled to. Before the mantel clock strikes the nine o'clock hour, I shall pen a codicil to the original Will, to be witnessed in town by my old law partner, and leave one half of my entire estate to the now-grown children of my brother Nelson.

What a shock everyone will receive after my death, certainly my nieces and nephews who seem to remain ignorant of our connection. I will include something of an explanation for my actions. It is clear to me now that my death is necessary for the start of forgiveness towards me.