

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

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Seconds*

SEVEN SECONDS, A SLIT IN TIME, and in came death like a snake through a crack. A second earlier or later and the great mob war is not fought.

Blanchard had not worked for months; his life strategy of winning the lottery hadn't produced; his cash reserve dipped near empty. He pulled into the dusty back parking lot of The Regio wedding hall, where staff entered and where delivery trucks offloaded, the ugly cinderblock backside to the front's confectionary flutes and swirls. A few seconds earlier two sweating men in suits, pistols holstered beneath their armpits, had been guarding the door, but Blanchard didn't know about that, or that they had just been called away.

He was there to pick up an application, having come across a help wanted notice for The Regio during that morning's search. His attenuated bearing impressed, by design, as little upon the world as possible. He eased his car door shut with a soft click. Unhurried, he traversed the baking lot like a slow insect. Pads of concrete grist had collected in the hollows of undulating asphalt; through shoes worn thin as slippers, he could perceive individual grains of it like walking barefoot on a hard sand beach. It made a dry squelching sound underfoot. His posture was that of a man pulled downward by a rope around the neck, which angled his face square into waves of reflected heat. He narrowed his eyes into slits for protection. The Regio's back door opened to an unlit hallway. At its far end an upright rectangle of light scintillated from blue to red to white.

He had unearthed his best clothes from mothballs in anticipation of meeting management—a satin powder blue dress shirt, rubbed in patches to translucency, and blue slacks that rode high at the ankles, exposing white socks. He would wear the same should they call him for an interview. The color and density of his hair looked like dandelion spoor ready and waiting to detach in a gust of wind.

A wedding hall job was as good as any.

As a child, and then a man, he had always been honest, bland, and forgettable. Arriving at the age when following a banal routine acquires a patina of sadness from long practice, and from the probability of dying while doing it, losing his job bussing tables at a diner had shaken him, upending sadness and exposing its obverse, despair. He knew no one; he loved no one. Women had risen in his mind to inhabit such an exalted plane, while he had descended, that hope in them had long been abandoned. A sensible concession. He'd never generated an original thought, but now, walking down the hallway toward the scintillating light, his money running out and the future looming like a black wave ready to break, he was prepared to receive one.



The big boss didn't want them to know he was coming. He'd ordered his tuxedo and barber brought to the hospital, intending to make a stir with a surprise appearance. It was a calculated gambit affecting arenas

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large and small (at eighty two he wasn't superannuated yet). On the ride over to The Regio, he reminded himself to have Joe D check out a proposition from the dean of medicine to move product out of the hospital. The deal had potential—not huge, but good. He groped his crotch, testing. Yes, he had enough still in there to give his mistress a ride later on. She was twenty four and plump as an overfed hen.

The limousine stopped in front of The Regio and waited, its mirrored windows an enigma to the jumpy guards; soon a whole squad had assembled like squirrels forming up to mob a snake. When the proper tension had been achieved, the big boss lowered the window. Of course, they practically fell down. His door was opened by the number two guard; the number one helped lift him out.

"Boss! You should have told us!"

They ushered him inside, keeping clear of his crab-walking feet and cane but staying close enough to catch a fall. It would be an easy catch; he was a nub of bone and gristle.

A fanfare like shooting rockets greeted him inside. The reception was in high gear, but at his entrance someone grabbed the DJ and killed the dance music.

"Boss, you honor us by coming."

"You should have told us!"

He pocketed their oblations; he patted the heads of children, kissed the bride. The bride and groom led him to a place of honor at their table. The big boss, knowing how to please, gave his blessing for The Chicken Dance to recommence. Joe D approached in a deferential hunch and wished him good health.

"I got a lead for you at the hospital."

"Yes, Boss."

"We'll talk."

"Yes, Boss."

This wedding formed an alliance of sorts. Not quite a dynastic union but something that might lead to one. The groom belonged to the big boss, the bride to a rival. Both factions had sent their elite and, aside from the guards, had left their guns at home. The big boss's rival had bungled his chance and begged off for health reasons. He would not do the same, which was why he'd overruled his doctors to come. Symbolism worked powerful magic on men such as these. It made children out of them. The big boss taking charge of the room could not be mistaken for anything other than bold domination.

Then it happened. As the reception wound down he remembered the wedding gift in his inner pocket, an envelope fat with hundred dollar bills. He shoved it in the bride's hand and yanked her close for a bony kiss on the cheek. But when she bent over to add it to the satchel bulging with other overstuffed envelopes, she screamed. It had been stolen.

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So began the great mob war. As anyone would expect, the budding alliance between the rival factions died in the womb. But there were ambassadors of other factions at the reception as well; some suspected that one of these had stolen the money in a Machiavellian scheme to keep their rivals split, at least, and at best to set them at each others' throats. What resulted was an existential conflict of one against all.

Bodies surfaced all over New York; women and children perished in indiscriminate crossfire. They gunned down the groom outside a home improvement store; they blew up the big boss in his mistress's apartment (the ceiling of the apartment below had been covered wall to wall with explosives). Joe D suffered such a savage garroting, his head came off. The Regio's staff was tortured, including the DJ, and murdered for good measure. A Guatemalan dishwasher who had called out sick was chained to a toilet in a warehouse until he died of starvation, his torturers having been killed.



The great mob war made national news for over two years. Killing inspired counter-killing, causality leading to causality, until the reason for it all was forgotten, or at least irrelevant, but Blanchard, keeping abreast of the carnage from his new home in Albuquerque, did not forget. He'd driven out west two years before, taking an apartment in a cheap part of town—not the cheapest, but pretty cheap. He paid cash, as he always had his whole life, for all those little expenses that really added up—gas, take-out, the laundromat, lottery tickets, haircuts, beer. His bank account grew so big so quickly, it was like he had two jobs. But he only had the one, bus-sing tables at a diner, and though it paid a lot less than what he made in New York, the cost of living was so much less that—along with his other money—it more than provided.

Seven seconds. That was how long it took him, standing in the doorway behind the wedding party's table, in the light that scintillated blue to red to white, to identify the satchel filled with money—one envelope was open, little tongues of legal tender sticking out—to make the decision to take it, to walk over, pick it up, and carry it back the way he'd come, swallowed by the unlit hallway as by a pool of ink. Seven seconds. They were the precise seven seconds he could ever be granted to do what he did. They were the precise seven seconds when no one was at the table, when no one was even looking at it, all eyes fixed on the big boss's unexpected entrance, not a thought given to anything else, certainly not to the possibility of anyone daring to steal the satchel of money from under their noses (they, who would defend to the death the money they had stolen from others, as a point of honor). Blanchard had never stolen anything in his life. He'd chosen as his debut crime a theft from a giant room filled with professional thieves and murderers.

Dozens were killed or mutilated, at least one dozen for each second. Blanchard fell into the same routine of sad resignation he'd followed in New York. His second chance. He toyed with the notion of buying a sports car, not too high end. He would toss down a brick of cash in front of an

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astonished salesman. But no. That satisfaction would only last a second or two; it would not endure; it would pass in a flash. In the end, it wasn't worth it. If he kept to his routine, so easy for him now, having so much practice, the mobsters would never catch him. No one would ever give him a second thought, as always. His salvation.