

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

Niles Reddick

Jigsaw Puzzle Pieces

SHE DIDN'T START DYING TODAY, or even when she was twelve and her thirteen-year-old cousin pushed her onto her grandmother's old feather mattress on the old iron bestead, pinning her down and tearing her underwear off and shoving his consciousness into her, the metal springs squeaking with each of his gyrations.

No, she began dying before she was born, growing and moving toward a destination she could never have imagined in her wildest of Disney-like dreams---three marriages to white trash, all of whom were lazy, their "won'ts" becoming "can'ts" for disability checks, her mother blessing their hearts because "they couldn't help they're trash" and a daddy who had long since given up because he didn't know what to do with her: the overeating, the alcohol and marijuana abuse, and the filthy mouth that would not stop sassing everyone; even her minimum wage employers time and again had fired her.

She remembered her grandmother's old weathered hand and crooked fingers smoothing wrinkles across her dress smoothing wrinkles saying, "You'll be okay; just forget about it." She can remember her own mother's nostrils flaring when she told her before they went home, her mother raising hell at her daddy in the car, her other sisters quieted by fright of something happening to them, and her daddy saying, "I don't want to hear no more about it."

Now, her parents are planted in a church yard no one visits and where plastic flowers fade in blistering sun, and she lives her final years in a gated trailer park in the mountains of North Georgia, where there is a lack of water and people retire with an emotional thirst they cannot quench. She mostly watches shapes in clouds on the mountains and hummingbirds addicted to sugar water like little flying alcoholics and tries to put the pieces of her time together in a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, where the pieces do not match the picture on the box. Each piece takes her to a different configuration.

She never spoke to the cousin again, not at family reunions that decreased over time and ended with the death of one generation; not at funerals where "how good she was", "how he was loved", or how "we'll see them again" were standard comfort lies; not when he arrested her son who was a clone of the second husband sprinkled with some spices from her personality, but she stayed close with his sister. She learned his life, like the majority of the family, had been one of self-induced suffering and disappointment -- his own daughter he'd called a slut because she took rookies home from bars and had a string of marriages before thirty. His own grandchildren raised hell and went to jail and even his rank couldn't help them get out earlier. And she was glad to hear he suffered, she was glad to hear he wasn't well and had to take hits of oxygen to keep breathing, and she hoped he would go to hell, if there was such a place, and she

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wondered about the other generations and if they would all be there and she figured she would end up there, too, and that it was too late to change.

“I better make some more hummingbird food, George.” They’d been together three years, but didn’t get married so she wouldn’t lose her last husband’s Social Security and health insurance.

“I’ll get it, Velma. You just sit there and enjoy them hummingbirds and turn off the news. Ain’t nothing good on.”

“Never is,” Velma said.