

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

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Over Easy

The plate clinked on the table so hard his water wobbled twice. This prompted him to jiggle the works, testing for a loose leg. Finding none, he looked up at Reny and gave her a smile — a subtle straight-lipped one with his eyes widened as if there was a question to follow.

But none came, and the waitress crinkled her nose and shrugged.

It's not going to break, she said, and neither are you if you get an omelet with the whole egg. You only live once, you know.

Which is why I stick to the whites, he said. Can you tell me where a guy can get a cup of coffee?

Yeah, she replied, the pot.

She walked past the impressive machine common to diners with two carafes beneath the hoppers and a second pair on the warmers up top. As usual, the pot with the orange handle was nearly full, and he wondered who in the world drank decaf this side of six a.m.

He pondered this until she returned with a bowl of yogurt and berries sprinkled with granola. In her other hand was a saucer with two buttered slices of rye, so he popped up and crossed to the coffee. He poured the brew into a chipped cup that should have been retired a decade earlier.

Meanwhile, she sat and lit a cigarette — a spindly More menthol — inhaling like a beached fish.

That's a dirty, rotten habit, he said.

You have a few of your own.

As he sat, he scoffed and took the first bite of his spinach and cheddar omelet followed by some yogurt. The berries were the tasteless sort you got when you rushed the season. But he was never one for pancakes and the way they sat in your gut all day. Besides, the syrup was downright cloying.

No, this was his breakfast. He was consistent if nothing else, eating the same thing at the same place for eighteen years.

He adjusted his holster to give his arms free range and investigated her face — the sculpted features, a few stray lines under the eyes nearly hid by her deft hand with makeup. He considered asking her out once, after the one time he woke up next to her, but figured she enjoyed company like him — in small doses with prescribed roles.

That was the one reason he preferred the beat to undercover. In uniform, he felt set apart from this goddamned mess. But working the squad he seemed masked, as if he was as duplicitous as his collars.

Sure the criminal code helped unlock some of the thorniest stuff. Still, at the end of the day a lot of these people were just trying to find their way — to make up for layoffs, foreign imports, and twelve-percent rates at the savings and loan.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

True bad guys, murderers and rapists and crews that extorted from mom and pop shops, were few and far between.

He had a bit less compassion for the druggies. It made no sense to him to deliberately drain away the little hope that was left. But then again maybe these kids were just trying to copy the lifeless stare they saw in their parents' eyes.

She asked, so how was your shift? Waiting for an answer, she helped herself to his coffee and took another drag.

Quiet, he said, spent most of it doing surveillance of a crew stealing electronics.

Think you can get me a deal on a T.V.?

He laughed. Her sense of humor was one of the things that recommended her most; that and the way she slipped it into long bouts of listening to him talk, or more likely bitch, about everything and nothing in particular.

She understood certain things about the job, the way it siphoned away his faith in people, even himself. At his best, he was a skeptic. At his worst — a cadaver, stripped of his humanity in favor of a badge and gun.

She asked, don't you have a few days off coming up?

Four, he replied, we always do when guys flip shifts.

And you're staying on nights?

Yep, he said, requested them.

Freak.

We come out at night, he said.

Reny shook her head and helped herself to some of the rye. Her hands trembled and he wondered if she took anything besides coffee to stay awake.

Mack, she said, you should really work on being normal. You know?

How so?

For starters, use full sentences for answers, she said. It's exhausting pulling every fucking thing out of you.

No one likes being gutted, he replied.

No one's trying to gut you, she said. They just want to have a friendship without feeling like they've been a meal for a vampire.

There's no false advertising, he said.

No, you're just guilty of being a schmuck.

He stirred the yogurt and spooned some into his mouth then chased it with coffee.

I'm thinking about heading down to Point Pleasant for a few days, he said, maybe head on a charter for some blue fish. A guy on the squad has a place down there with his father, and cops stay free early in the season.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Good for you, she said. Decompress.

So, what's going on with you?

You really want to know?

He shrugged as if he had no other defense and took a swig of water. Then he cut a piece of omelet with the edge of his fork and stabbed it, but stopped short of lifting it to his mouth.

I'm going to have to put my mother someplace, she said. She forgot to feed the dog twice last week and left the stove on another night. If it wasn't for the smoke detector, she might have burned the house down.

I'm sorry about that. How old is she?

Eighty-three next month, she replied.

Whew. She's one tough bird, he said. I remember when I was a kid stopping by for milk and cookies on the porch after playing basketball.

She still has a porch, you know.

But it doesn't sound like she should be making cookies, he said.

She smiled in spite of herself and lit a second cigarette. She inhaled and held the smoke inside her, closing her eyes. He figured it was the closest she had come to praying in some time.

Seriously, she said, do you think you could help me with the packing and all? Jade has her three rug rats, and her boyfriend is an ass.

Umm, yeah, he replied. Where's she going?

I found a nice place over by the interstate, she said, behind the airport. The rooms are a bit small, but the staff seems nice enough. I'm going to tell her the day after tomorrow.

Sounds like you've said that before, he said.

He finally ate the piece of omelet hanging on the edge of his fork. As he chewed, he caught her wiping something shiny from the corner of her eye.

I just can't do it anymore, she said. I'm alone, and there's work, the grandkids, three kids to fret over and my own junk. I'm forty-eight years old, for crying out loud. If I don't watch, I'll beat the old lady to her grave.

You mentioned Jade, he said. What's up with the other two?

Johnny's in the Air Force, she said, Italy. Maria's in neck deep at her firm in Boston. She called a few days before Christmas to say she was up for partner and she'd try to sneak home after the holidays. Now Easter is gone and not a word.

You raised her better than that, he said.

You bet your ass I did. And thanks.

He felt a sudden compulsion to take hold of her hand but thought better of it. He picked at the omelet some more and followed with a spoonful of the yogurt then the coffee as if the order meant something.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

I should be able to help you, he said. I have time over the weekends. I can even cut into the trip if need be.

Well, Peter Joseph McCarthy, look at you being sweet, she said. Seriously, you should go down to the shore. But you're all mine the Saturday after next.

You'll have it all set up by then?

Believe it or note, she said, I didn't just start planning this today. I've dealt with the finances, talked to her doctor, all that.

You just need me for the grunt work, he said.

You're good at it.

He took a long but soft look at her. She had a pretty smile, eyes that held you, the long and delicate sort of fingers. Her blouse spread just enough to give him a healthy look inside when she leaned forward on her elbows. The tops of her breasts looked soft and inviting.

Sometimes, it's just easier to bury your head and check things off a list, he said.

I'm sure, she replied. And some days I bet it feels like a luxury. The trouble is one day you wake up old and alone.

Forty-six in September, he said.

Shit, and with cheeks that are twenty-four.

He set his chin in his hands and smiled big enough so he could feel his dimples encroaching on his eyes. It was not the first time he'd been told there was a touch of handsome on him, with his dark hair — sprinkled with some salt now — accentuating his steel blue eyes. The rest of his features were squared off, as rugged as the city he called home.

Because the job called for it, he put some effort into staying fit with regular hikes along the bluffs bordering the Delaware Water Gap and through the game lands where his dad took him hunting as a kid. He played a bit of softball with a team of cops, and he still jogged a few miles a day when his knees let him.

But he gave up basketball three years after joining the force. The spring was gone from his legs, and he never possessed the sort of shot you live and die with. So, the kids ran circles around him, which chafed his pride enough that he quit.

They actually met through the sport, during his sophomore year, when he surprised himself by making varsity then the starting lineup and eventually the all-county team. She was a year older, a half-hearted cheerleader with legs made for those skirts.

The next year they sat next to each other in Trigonometry and talked quite regularly. By a loose definition of the word they were friends, with the occasional walk through the park or to the ice cream shop in the warmer months. He even bought her a graduation present. But he was fixated on basketball, the possibility of a scholarship and the expectations of his old man.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Mack, when was the last time you saw your dad?

Last fall for my birthday, he said. We met in Myrtle Beach and played golf for a few days. He bought me lobster.

Nothing for Christmas?

Nah, he said, we don't do the whole traditional thing since mom died. He had this whole fishing thing planned in the Keys. I might have got an invitation, but I never planned to go.

Don't you think he wanted you to go?

I don't really know and don't really care.

Mack, he's your father.

I know that, Ren. But he doesn't need more like your mother needs you.

Have you asked him?

He finished the yogurt and stacked the empty bowl on top of the plate with the half-eaten omelet. After another sip of coffee, he looked at her with slightly widened eyes.

Look, he said, I honestly don't want to. He never asked me if I needed him when I left the team at State. There was no question as to why I walked away from what I loved. He just shut me out, gave me that disappointed look he'd been perfecting since I was six.

You could have told him the truth, she said.

I could have. And he would have told me precisely what he'd have me do: Respect the coach, toe the line, stay out of it and be a good citizen.

That course works for a lot of people, she said.

They were shaving points, Reny! My teammates were slacking off when I was busting my ass. I wasn't going to be their bitch.

No one was asking you to, Mack.

They sort of were, he replied.

Pfft. She drew the tiny tablet she used for orders out of her apron and set it in front of her, scratching at it as if her finger was a pen. He figured she really wanted another smoke.

We're probably going to get a bit of a rush soon, she said. I need to wrap some silverware and stack cups.

Yeah, I should go and get some sleep, he replied. If I go now, I'll be decent this afternoon.

OK. I'll call you about mom's move.

He nodded as he buried his hands in his pockets.

Just give me an address when you have everything set, he said. You pretty much see me every day.

Like the rising sun.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Until the day it doesn't.

She nodded as she turned and walked toward the swinging kitchen doors. He admired the rise and fall of her buttocks, the way they rounded out nicely below an arguably too-narrow back. Then he sighed and pulled two singles out of his breast pocket, tucking them beneath his water cup.

She deserved at least that much for her trouble.