

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

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My Plus One

Although Patrice insisted her nephew knew what he was doing, Callie advocated for a licensed electrician to do the work. No, Callie didn't know anyone personally, but it was easy enough to shop around for one. Patrice didn't see the point in waiting. The Lord had sent Callie to help and Callie's first idea – to renovate the large building where the animals were housed – was not going to be delayed by waiting on “some electrician” when Topher was looking for work. Patrice saw it as a “win-win.” Callie didn't like the fact the twenty-year-old's nickname rhymed with the name of a large rodent. And, Topher's two front protruding teeth didn't help to mitigate the connection either.

It would be two months before the fire inspector would conclude that the wiring to the ventilation fan caused the fire. The cost to replace the building would be extraordinary. The insurance company wanted Topher's license and bond information, which he was unable to provide as it did not exist, and the building inspector had never issued a permit. Patrice had waved her hand at Callie when Callie suggested that Patrice comply with the town's requirements. “It's fine,” Patrice assured Callie, adding that she didn't need the town knowing her every move.

Callie was the first person Patrice called the afternoon the fire department extinguished the fire which charred the bodies of Patrice's menagerie.

She said, “Callie, it's Patrice. They're gone.”

Patrice began to cry, and as Callie was asking “who,” she heard a man's voice. He said, “I'm with the Bosbury Fire Department. There's been a fire. No one was hurt, but your friend would like you here.”

It took seventeen minutes for Callie to get to the estate. Eight minutes out, she saw the smoke. She watched the gray and black plume ascend and dissipate against the blue backdrop. She tried not to picture the caged animals panicking and clawing as the fire came to overtake them. She wondered about the damage and if Amadeus had been with Patrice or in his “home” when the fire consumed the building. Would his rhinestone collar would be recovered?

Callie wiped her tears as she drove down the driveway littered with fire engines, police cruisers, and an ambulance. They hadn't known what they were coming out to; better to send everyone.

Callie wanted to run to Patrice, but she knew the time for drama had passed. They were all dead, and no amount of haste would reverse that. Callie saw the short tennis skirt and pink and green striped sleeveless top from a distance. All the other people were in uniform and fully covered. When Patrice's varicose veins came into focus, Callie called out to her over the hissing of water-soaked timbers.

Patrice turned to Callie and held out her arms. They were empty: she was not holding Amadeus, her hamster who Callie confirmed had an issue with hoarding. Callie got to her just as Patrice's legs folded; she was

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falling. Scooping her up and encouraging her to come over to the bench, Callie bore the burden of helping her to the shaded seat.

"Don't say anything, Callie," Patrice said. "Just sit with me, please."

Callie wanted to tell her that she was so sorry for her loss, for the loss of the animals. They had been living in near squalor when Callie first met them all of two months ago. The renovations and changes made their quality of life improve. Callie knew they were better from her involvement; she knew that Patrice was better, as well.

But now what? Callie was now without any clients at the Bosbury estate. There were no survivors; she heard what Patrice said, "They're gone."

The fire fighter with the white helmet motioned for Callie to come over to him. She whispered to Patrice's bowed head she would be right back and placed Patrice's right hand into her lap.

"Are you her daughter?" he asked.

"No, just a friend," Callie said.

"All right. We got the fire out. But as you can probably guess, the building is unsafe. No one can go in there; in fact, better to stay a safe distance from the structure. The fire inspector will be out tomorrow or the next day. Once he signs off on the cause, it'll have to be demolished. It won't take much to level it."

Callie nodded and said, "I can help her coordinate that."

The white-helmeted man turned and opened the driver's side door of the oversized red pickup truck. He spun around to Callie and handed her three business cards.

"These rigs all know what they're doing," he said.

"Do you have a preference?" she asked.

"Priscilla's Precision Demolition out of Springfield does a good job," he said.

Callie looked over to Patrice. She had lifted her gaze and was watching the thin streak of smoke as it passed through the needles of the towering pines.

"Thanks, I appreciate the referral. Are you all done now?" she asked.

"Yeah. We're going to pack up and go."

"All right. Thanks for coming out," Callie said.

"It's what we do. Property loss is hard, but she ought to be thankful no one died," he said clearly unsympathetic to the scores of lives lost. He added, "And, make sure she calls her insurance company first thing tomorrow."

"Yes, I will," Callie said, "Thank you, Chief."

"Just deputy chief, ma'am. The chief's at the firehouse."

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Callie half smiled. She hated being called “ma’am” but didn’t have the energy to explain her position on the anonymous form of address. She had nothing more to say to him. She made her way to Patrice.

“Patrice, could I bring you something? Maybe a cold drink?”

“What time is it?” she asked.

“Four-thirty,” Callie said.

“Close enough. I’ll have a double dirty martini,” Patrice said, “You know how to make one?”

“I do,” Callie said. She didn’t, but she knew she could find the recipe on her cell phone. “I’ll be right back.”

Callie went through the three-season porch to access the kitchen. She searched for a recipe and learned she needed only three ingredients. She’d start with the gin. Looking in the high cabinets, as this was where her own mother kept her ready supply of alcohol, Callie couldn’t seem to locate the bottle. She found the green olives and the vermouth in the fridge, but no gin. As the alcohol was likely the piece of the drink which Patrice was most interested in, Callie had to ask.

She stepped back past the white wicker furniture and glass-top coffee table and called, “Patrice?”

“In the freezer,” she answered. Callie got the clear sense that she’d responded to other confused makeshift bartenders before.

The clear square-edged bottle with the queen’s guard on the side was only a third full. Callie grabbed it by the neck and placed the three ingredients on the center island. The bar tool kit was on the counter. The shaker was inverted on a towel next to the sink. Recently used.

Callie doubled the amounts and followed the steps. She couldn’t find a proper martini glass but deemed the lowball glass with the etched “P” as likely to be Patrice’s glass. It was too early for Callie, and she had to drive. She poured herself an iced tea from the always-full pitcher in the fridge.

Crossing the summer-green grass toward the crumpled figure on the bench, Callie noticed that the breeze had shifted. The smell of scorched skin and fur reached her nostrils.

“Patrice, maybe we should go sit on the porch?” Callie said, handing the glass to her.

“No. I’m going to wait for the smoke to go. Wait for them to make their way to heaven.”

Callie knew it meant more to Patrice to stay than it did for Callie to insist on not having to inhale the scent of death. She sat next to her and sipped her tea. It took less than twenty minutes for Patrice to finish the drink and the six olives.

“Why six?” she asked.

“I thought three per serving,” Callie explained, “Why, too many?”

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"No, green olives are something of a food group for me." Patrice paused and tipped her head back. The smoke was still rising, though less so. "You've only been with me for two months. Do you know that?"

"Yes. I was just thinking that. Not too long, but long enough you thought to call me."

"You're about the same age as my daughter," Patrice said.

"Oh yeah?" Patrice had never mentioned her children. Callie never asked; she was there for the animals.

"She's been asking me to come see her. She's in Rochester, New York. I've not been able to go because of my responsibilities here," she said, slightly motioning toward the destroyed building. Patrice started to cry. She said, "Looks like I can go now. I have no one to take care of."

Callie wrapped her left arm around Patrice's shoulders. She took the empty glass from Patrice's right hand and placed it next to her own. Callie could picture the map. Rochester was upstate and on the main highway. The original route went right through Rochester until Callie changed it so she could try glass blowing in Corning.

"We're driving right through Rochester. Next week. We could bring you there," Callie said without any regard to what Ray or Frank might think and dispensing with all professional boundaries.

"Who is?"

"Me, my friend Ray, and his father Frank. Ray and I are driving to the West Coast for his sister's wedding. We're dropping Frank somewhere in Minnesota. We're going to be taking the northern route. I'm sure that it would be no problem to bring you there." Callie realized the offer was odd and added, "Unless you'd prefer to drive yourself – or even fly. How do you normally get there?"

"I've never been. I imagine I'd drive myself but, tell you what, I'd rather not. I don't think I'd be any good on a long car ride all by myself."

That solidified it in Callie's mind. "Well, you don't need to be by yourself. We'll get you there. We need to leave on August first. Ray and I have the whole month planned out. Can you be ready to go on the first?"

"Yes," she said. "Are you sure you don't mind?"

"It's only six hours from here to there. It's absolutely no problem. It might be fun."

"Well, I'm going to buy lunch for everyone," Patrice said.

"That'll be nice," Callie said. She pulled the three business cards from her pocket. "I was given these. Apparently, after the fire inspector figures out what caused the fire, you will need to have the building demolished. They said that you can't go in there. It's not safe."

"You know what happened as well as I do," Patrice said as she turned to face Callie for the first time that afternoon.

"I don't know what happened, Patrice."

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Patrice reached over and patted Callie's hand. She said, "Thank you for not saying it."

Her tears were back.

Callie said, "I'm sorry for your loss. They were all good little critters."

"Would you fix me another?" Patrice asked.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I'm not going anywhere," Patrice said. "You're welcome to stay and have one yourself." Patrice looked desperate. She added, "And, I'll pay you for your time."

Callie said, "I'll be right back."

Returning to the three ingredients sweating rings onto the marble countertop, Callie made a triple, found another short glass, and fished nine olives from the jar. She handed Patrice her double and said, "I'm here today as your friend. You are not paying me. I want to be here."

Patrice laughed and asked, "Does that mean that all the times I did pay you, you didn't want to be here?"

Callie smiled. "No, that's not what I meant." Raising her glass, Callie said, "To you and to everything you have done for all of them."

Patrice said, "To Amadeus. Without him, you wouldn't be here with me now."

"To Amadeus," Callie said.

An hour later, the smoke had become imperceivable, though the smell lingered. Callie's slight buzz had faded. She called Ray on the way home and told him that they'd need to make room for one more.