

## Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

*Rose Betit*

### **Almost Saved**

**T**ODAY IS A GLORIOUS MORNING 'cause the sun is shining bright even though the air is cool with winter coming in. Mama let us eat cinnamon buns and milk for breakfast, since we just got groceries. Auntie Gracie gave us a ride to the grocery store so she could watch over what mama buys. She said if we want a ride, though, we gotta be up early. We can't be lazy, expecting her to go get the groceries for us. Mama says she just wants to run our lives, so she always sneaks a goody or two in the cart when Auntie Gracie ain't looking. "Cause it ain't none of her business!" mama always says. I am thankful that she took us to the store, but I don't like how she's always telling mama that without her, she would be nothing and wouldn't know what to do with herself, making mama look down at the floor. Mama's head hanging down at that time, makes me think of a half dead flower that's about to break from drooping over.

Mama said "well thanks for taking us to the store, Gracie," but my aunt ain't acting like she's going anywhere fast 'cause she's done parked herself by the table. Instead she asks me to come have a seat on her lap being as she doesn't see me much anymore and look at me, I'm light as a feather.

I sit in her lap but it feels strange and what mama calls "phony" 'cause that's what it's called when someone pretends something like they like you, but they don't really. That's what it feels like. Like she's pretending 'cause she never asked me to sit in her lap before. Besides, I didn't want to hurt her feelings even though she don't seem to mind hurting Mama's feelings.

So I'm sitting there and she's talking away to mama while she's leaning over and looking past her out the kitchen window.

"The blacks are as thick as fleas around here now. I don't know how you stand it." Then just as quick she changes the subject.

"My, my, Isabelle, you sure have a sharp rump!" she says laughing. That's when I get the idea to shift my body so my rump bone is pushing into her leg harder 'cause I don't like how she's saying black people are like fleas 'cause it's like she's talking about Evelyn too and she ain't like no nasty flea.

"Ouch! That hurts! Hop up!" she snaps at me and I hop up. My back is to her so she can't see my face and I smile at my mama, who I know is smiling but she's hiding it behind her tumbler of coffee 'cause it ain't just her mouth that's smiling but her eyes too.

"Well, I'd best be going. Oscar and I have to get church." Then she stands at the door and turns and puts her hand next to her mouth like she's telling a secret. I always notice the same thing about how her hair doesn't move 'cause it has so much hairspray in it and she says, "Look out for the niggras, ya heaaauh." and she tip toes out to her yellow Grand Torino and drives off fast as she can down the alley with red clay dust rising up all over.

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Then mama says how she can't stand her and how she'd like to grab her by her hair and swing her around. And "ain't her teeth as yellow as this table?" That's what mama says every time Auntie Gracie comes and goes.

With Auntie Gracie gone, mama takes out of the grocery bags and thanks the Lord for each item.

"Thank you, Jesus, for the peanut butter. Thank you, Jesus, for the bread. Thank you, Jesus, for the coffee mate. Thank you, Jesus, for the coffee.... Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus."

We have to all gather around the table while she prays and thanks the Lord for the food.

She pulls out a bag of apples and Stevie whispers to me that she has to thank the Lord for each apple.

Mama hears him and tells him to hush 'cause it's impolite to interrupt when she's talking to the Lord, don't he know?

I'm glad to see she only thanks Jesus for the whole bag of apples and I see we're almost finished.

Joseph is sitting at the table with a string of lollipops in all colors and he's thanking the Lord for each color.

I want to ask if we have to wait for him to finish since Mama, the official prayer sayer in our family, is done, but I don't dare 'cause I'm afraid I'll disturb the peace by asking and Joseph will have a conniption fit and maybe even have to start all over.

He's on the last lollipop and there's a knock at the door. Mama says that he said a fine prayer and we could all learn to pray like that too and it wouldn't kill us.

It's Evelyn and she wants to know if I can come out and play. I think Mama's gonna let me, but then she says we're going to church this morning. I want to ask if Evelyn can come, but Mama said once, that only white folks go to our church, so a black wouldn't fit in.

"I ain't got nothin' to wear, Mama." I say, and Evelyn tells me right quick that I can come borrow a dress of hers, 'cause she's sure to have some that could fit me.

"Can I, Mama?" I ask.

"Go ahead, but don't be long. We don't want to make Mrs. Gunnels wait."

I grab a couple of lollipops for me and Evelyn and her little sister, Barbara, and we're off across the driveway. I lay the lollipops on the kitchen table at Evelyn's house and Barbara is all excited to see them. She picks up a couple of them and holds them up to the sunlight pouring in the window and squeals. It feels good to make your best friend's little sister so happy over lollipops on a Sunday morning when you have food enough at home so you can share.

The dress I'm borrowing is dark purple and Evelyn says it's the color of royalty and I plum look like a princess in it.

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I stand in the mirror and look all dreamy at myself. "I reckon I do."

"You sure do that dress right! You can keep it if you want. It don't fit me anymore."

I do want it, so I twirl in the mirror and tell her thank you very much.

"It ain't nothin." she says.

Mama's calling, so I have to go. I make my way back over to my place to wait for Mrs. Gunnels. We're sitting around the table waiting. Nobody's saying much since we all have lollipops in our mouths. Joseph is counting the rest of them in their shiny plastic wrappers and putting them in color groups and counting them again. Stevie has his face in his book, like always. Mama's done reminded him that he can't bring it to church and disrespect the Lord by reading in church. He didn't answer anything back but I know he won't dare bring it and bring about the wrath of Mama and the Lord at the same time.

Mama's having a lollipop too and she says she don't have to worry about getting cavities from the sugar that's in it since she's already got false teeth. It makes me worry that I will get cavities, but right now, I don't much care 'cause this orange lollipop is my favorite.

Mrs. Gunnels pulls up in the driveway and we go out like we're in a parade to get in her car. It's a big shiny Buick that's a pretty blue color. The neighbors all around are looking at us while we duck into the shiny cars like a bunch of movie stars ducking down into their limousines while everybody looks on pointing with their mouths hanging open. I imagine for a minute that we're a famous family and this is our limo. Our Mama is a famous movie star and we sing in a family band but we also play in TV shows too when the producer man is willing to pay us enough.

So, after the opening prayers, we're all sitting there just as quiet as we could be, the whole church, cause we're in the middle of a few moments of "reflection". I don't know what they mean by reflection since the only reflection I know is when you look in a mirror or in a window, but I don't see any windows around. I try to ask Stevie if there are mirrors we're supposed to look in, but Mama throws a dirty look at me, so I know I better shut up.

It was in that moment when I figured I had better shut my mouth when Joseph figured he should open his.

"Look!" he says pointing toward a man who ain't got no hair so the lights from the ceiling are reflecting on his head. I'm joking to myself, "there's the reflection they were talking about" and Joseph says at that same second that thought was in my head, "There's a fly on that man's head!"

The whole church, bursts out laughing and Mama turns beet red and covers her face with her song book. She keeps her head like this for a minute until the congregation starts singing a song and she feels like it's safe to look up again when folks ain't looking at us anymore.

About halfway through church when Brother Wilson announces that the sermon will be short cause there's going to be a "calling up" today.

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He's going to invite us up to be saved just like they do on the Billy Graham show that Mama likes to watch cause it makes her feel so close to the Lord to watch it.

The choir starts singing and we're invited to sing along. It's the same song they sing on the Billy Graham show. I can tell it gets Mama emotional cause tears are welling up in her eyes. She loves when they have a "calling up to Christ" at church and she'd go up again and again, but she's already saved, she said, and you can only be saved once.

*"Just as I am, without one plea,  
But that Thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!"*

Folks are singing and Brother Wilson is talking into the microphone.

"Come as you are. He's calling you to come up and receive him as your personal Lord and Savior. Come, receive him and there are people waiting right here to pray with you," he says.

People are getting up from their seats and going forward up to the podium. Some of them are looking around first as if they aren't sure if they should go up, but then Brother Wilson's words make them want to go ahead and get up. There's so many people, two long lines are forming on both sides of the stage where the altar is.

The saved people come back smiling and crying at the same time with tears flowing down their faces and they're whispering, "Thank you Jesus. Yes, Jesus."

*"Just as I am, and waiting not  
To rid my soul of one dark blot;  
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!"*

Brother Wilson is laying more words on top of the singing, "Yes, you. No matter what sins blot your soul. Come and ask the Lord into your heart and he'll forgive you. If you feel it in your heart, don't wait. Tomorrow might be too late. The Lord is calling you to come forward."

I'm sitting at the end of the pew with my brothers in between me and Mama. I'm looking at her out of the corner of my eye and thinking how I want to get rid of any "blots on my soul", just in case I got some, 'cause I'm not sure what that means. I'm thinking Mama would be so proud of me if I go up to be saved. Then we'll be saved together and we can talk about how it is to be washed of our sins and how we'd love to go up over and over again but can't since you can only get saved once.

My heart is beating fast since I'm not sure if it's okay if I go up, but I know I'm moved to go. So I think maybe the Lord is calling me like Brother Wilson is says. That's when I stand up and get in the line that's

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going down the aisle beside our seat. The line moves forward and I go with it. When I walk forward, I don't know what to do with my hands so I'm glad that my new hand-me-over dress from Evelyn has little pockets in the sides, so I put my hands in my pockets and make my way up the stairs to the crowded stage with all the prayer ladies who will pray with me so I can erase my sins.

Some space cleared up in front of a kind looking lady with silver hair and a light blue dress. I step forward and for a second we're just looking at each other 'cause I don't know exactly what to say when you're going up to receive the Lord as your Savior.

I'm thinking I'm supposed to say something like, "I want to receive Jesus into my heart.", when the silver haired lady smiles and bends down to me and says,

"Shuuugh, you're too youuuung," and she stretches out the word young like it's a mile long.

"Oh," I say, and turn and walk back to my seat with my blot still on me since I'm too young for the Lord to be my Savior.

Back at my seat, nobody says nothing to me, but Stevie is looking with his mouth open. Mama is staring straight ahead and clacking her false teeth. Joseph is dozing off with a lollipop in his mouth.

After church, there's supposed to be fellowship with donuts and we want to go, but Mama says she has a terrible headache and "Stevie, go find Mrs. Gunnels so we can ask her if she'll bring us on home."

"Why, of course, Jolene!" Mrs. Gunnels says all cheery, so we pile in her car to head back home. This time I don't feel like we're famous and everyone is looking on like they're amazed. This time, we're all quiet and looking down, and I think it's because we all know when we get home Mama's gonna have a fit.

I'm right. We get in the door after our polite thank you's to Mrs. Gunnels, and Mama lets loose on us.

"We can't go nowhere! Every time we try to go to church y'all have to make me the laughing stock! Joseph, you know better than to point at people!"

Joseph is looking up at her shocked, cause I think he has no idea he did anything wrong since everybody laughed when he told the whole congregation that the man in sitting two rows up had a fly on his head. It's not long before his shock turns to crying cause he didn't know.

Mama don't care. Now she's yelling me.

"And, Isabelle, what was that? What kind of stunt were you trying to pull?! Trying to make me look bad, is all!"

"No, I watn't, Mama! I was just tryin'..." I tried to explain, but she told me to be quiet and stop talking back.

"I just wanted to be saaaaved!" I cried and hid my face in my hands and let my tears fall onto the yellow Formica table.

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So, Joseph and me were sitting side by side at the table crying and Stevie told us to come in his room and listen to a story he could read to us. Joseph doesn't want to, but we tell him he can have another lollipop if he comes with us and stops crying.

We go into Stevie's room and he reads to us but we can hear Mama out in the kitchen talking away to herself about how she can't have normal young'uns, no, they gotta embarrass her. And that's it for church, she says. She really is finished now. She hasn't been so embarrassed since that whole crying and nursery incident I pulled about a year ago.

She's talking about the time we were in church and I fell asleep right in the middle of Brother Wilson's preaching and Mama pinched me to wake me up. I woke up alright. I woke up squawking like a baby and Stevie had to carry me off to the nursery and put me in a crib 'cause there were nowhere else for me to lay. I didn't care when he put me in the crib, but when I woke up, I felt plum foolish. There I was, a big ol' 7 year old, sleeping away in a crib like some kind of newborn.

Stevie paused reading.

"You know, Isabelle, you DID look kind of funny walking up there today. The way you walked looked like a farmer," he's laughing and trying to get me to laugh too. But it's hard to think it's funny when you're at church and the Lord is calling you up to be saved, but then a silver haired lady tells you you're too young for that and on top of it all, you walked like a farmer all the way up there and it front of the whole church embarrassing your mama to death.