

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

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Wrong Things

Mugsy has the limo so he picks me up at six and we get chocolate frappes from the pharmacy to throw at the fags in Northampton. I tell him about my mother and he laughs so hard he craps himself a little bit. He pulls over onto the shoulder. We're not downtown yet but there's a kid with blue hair at the bus stop. Mugsy rolls up slow and I stick my head out the window as though to ask for directions and the kid with blue hair comes closer and I smash my chocolate frappe point blank on his face, the container and everything. It scares him and he's about to cry and Mugsy guns the engine and we take off yelling all matter of redneck shit. I watch the kid getting smaller in my side mirror, cleaning up, probably actually crying now. Funny as hell to me, to us.

Fuckin blue haired faggot, Mugsy says.

He really has it in for the gays for some reason.

Then he lets me drive when we get by the church so he can do one.

I see an older guy with tight jeans and a tight white alligator shirt with the collar flipped up and Mugsy likes him right away for target practice. I stop at the red curb in front of a bar on Main Street called Fitzwilly's. Mugsy whistles like he would at a cute girl and the guy comes over and Mugsy gets him good. Standing still, the guy looks as though he's a melting statue at the wax museum; chocolate frappe dripping off his face in thin sheets. He starts hollering motherfucker this and motherfucker that, shaking his puny little fist, flipping us the bird.

We decide to hightail it since he's making such a scene.

The last thing either one of us needs is another brush with the cops.

Then the guy is in the rearview mirror, standing bowlegged in the middle of the street, furious, a bunch of his gay buddies pouring out of the bar to find out what happened to him.

It's fucking hilarious.

Mugsy laughs so hard he cries.

It's almost embarrassing.

I almost feel bad.

Fuckin tight jeans wearin faggot, Mugsy says.

Then he has to get the limo back to Wrisley's Funeral Home because somebody died. He drops me at the Hot L where I live upstairs in an apartment with my mother; she calls it a shit hole. She slings beers most evenings over to the VFW. But not tonight. Tonight she's in jail for stabbing her boyfriend in the neck with a busted Old Crow bottle. I smoke her cigarettes and watch television. There is a trail of blood from the kitchenette to the front door where I guess Tiny made his escape. He's over to Cooley Dick now. My mother barely missed an artery.

I call the hospital and he says he's okay relatively speaking. All things considered.

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A cunt hair to the left and I'd be a goner, he says.

Your fuckin mom, he says.

I agree in principle and we share a laugh. He's a good shit in my book. He's been banging my mom for three months and although we started off a little shaky we've become real chums. He sells cars over to Cherry's Used Auto in Ashfield and even promised to buy me a winter beater in November when I'm old enough to drive. I don't know that he'll stay true especially if my mother gives him the oxygen so I hope they can work things out at least until I turn sixteen-and-a-half. He tells me that they're going to release him in the morning and then he'll go to the bank and raise the bail to get my mom out of Greenfield Correctional.

That's the kind of guy he is; he'll spring for a crazy broad even after she cuts his jugular.

I sleep in my mother's bed and the next day Mugsy hauls a group of preppy kids to the roller skating rink at the new shopping mall in Hadley and then we swing by Whitmore's for some beer. I have a fake ID. Richard Blake comes out from around back where he lifts weights constantly; there's rumors he's on the juice and it wouldn't surprise me one bit. The guy is a fucking monster. His radio is blasting Bon Jovi's "Dead or Alive". He grunts and nods his head and gets me a suitcase of Bud from the walk-in fridge. We drink and drive around Amherst and try to chase down some UMass pussy but those bitches are too stuckup. Mugsy almost went to college on a football scholarship but his knee blew out and he didn't have the grades. Mom tells me I should think about the Army for when I get out of high school but that's two years away.

Two years is like forever.

A lot can happen in two fucking years.

My mother tells me crazy skips a generation so I don't have anything to worry about; out of the blue she says it, those are her exact words. Tiny spits cheap whiskey through his nose and into his hand when he laughs at her statement, which feels to me like some sort of confession or apology. He has a big swath of gauze taped to the side of his neck; he's given up trying to shave around it, he's given up trying to change the dressing daily. We're sitting at a high round table in the Bloody Brook Bar. All the regulars are in there at that hour. Everybody is teasing my mother and calling her Jackie the Ripper and she's taking it in stride but Tiny turns red from embarrassment. I'm trying to bum a couple bucks off my mother so I can score some weed from Tyrone Hatfield. She's out of her tits so it won't be too hard. I'm patient and listen to a drunken story or two. When she goes to the shitter Tiny digs in her purse and hands me a fistful of her tip money.

Don't spend it all in one place, he says.

It's always easier to be generous with somebody else's dough.

And he just wants to lose me so they can get romantic.

I meet Tyrone Hatfield in the alley next to Rogers & Brooks and he sells me a dime bag. As I'm about to hand him the cash Mugsy sneaks up behind him and cracks him on top of the head with an aluminum base-

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ball bat, making a sickening hollow sound at the point of contact. What the fuck, I say. That's exactly the kind of shit Mugsy pulls sometimes. The kind of shit that will come back to haunt us because Tyrone's older brother is a real fucking old school psycho, just out of Cedar Junction after a long stretch. Tyrone falls down unconscious and Mugsy wants to hit him again but I make him stop so we don't do a murder. That would be some serious shit.

We just leave Tyrone there, a halo of black blood forming around his head.

Did you fuckin hear that, Mugsy says.

Back in the stretch limo Mugsy is slamming his open hand on the dashboard trying to recreate the sound of the bat hitting Tyrone's skull, which is impossible because it was so perfect when it happened. He's pretty amped up still and so I roll a fat one quick to dial his adrenaline down; he can get totally out of control if I don't watch out. We stop in a cornfield to get high. Then there's a big bonfire at Hoosac's. We scoop up a couple townie skanks. Mugsy whales on Mary Zablonksi in the backseat while The Blow Job Queen earns her nickname up front with me.

Mugsy calls Mary a whore once he's finished with her.

When he says "whore" he drags it out in a funny way so it rhymes with "tour".

You're a dirty fuckin "whoore", he says.

I laugh my ass off. He zips his pants. She cries. The Blow Job Queen comes to her best friend's defense but she doesn't have a leg to stand on either. Then we take them to the BP Diner in Whately for biscuits and gravy. Mary pays the tab; she comes from money, her father owns the plastics factory. Her family thinks they're better than everybody. Then the Blow Job Queen puts quarters in the jukebox so I can listen to some Hank Williams Junior. We dance around the place like assholes until Jimmy Duck emerges from the kitchen and tosses us out.

Fuck that guy, Mugsy says outside.

Yeah fuck the Duck, I try to make him laugh.

The problem with Mugsy is he doesn't have an off switch.

We're standing in the parking lot. It had rained some and there are puddles. The girls are shivering. I put my hands in my pockets. Mugsy wants to go get the aluminum baseball bat from the trunk so he can teach Jimmy Duck a lesson too but I talk him down. It's not worth it, I say. He probably called the cops already, I say. We'll see him around town and he'll get what's coming. That kind of happy bullshit. People are watching us through the windows now. Mugsy enjoys an audience and we pile into the limo and he squeals the tires and fishtails onto 5&10.

Fuck those motherfuckin polacks, Mugsy says.

Mary smiles and sits right up against him like they're an old married couple.

Then I visit my mother over to the VFW. Tiny is there too, drinking

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brown booze for free and playing cards for coins with Robert "Hawk" Wilson and Boho. I eat a bowl of stale popcorn from the machine in the corner. Mom takes a cigarette break and sits down with me. She's been working double shifts to pay off all the fines related to the domestic battery charge. She takes her shoes off and rubs her yellow blistered feet. The ashes build up on the end of her Marlboro. My mother looks at me and doesn't say anything for a long time and that is never a good sign.

She uses silence to build up to something.

Hey shit for brains, she finally says.

I try to think of what she might be pissed about.

Just like your old man, she says.

That's supposed to be a hint but covers a lot of ground; I don't know what she's heard.

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree after all, she says.

My mother is quite the fucking philosopher these days.

You think I'm not gonna hear about all the wrong things you do, she says.

I play dumb some more and stick a handful of that nasty popcorn in my mouth.

That's exactly how your father started and look where he ended up, she says.

She's talking about jail, of course. My mother sighs through a face full of smoke.

I'm sorry how things turned out, she says after a few minutes.

How you turned out, she says.

I did the best I could, she says.

What a lie. My mother is a fucking liar. Lying to herself and to me.

But I don't say anything. What the fuck I'm supposed to say to that. She means my father going away like he did. Me coming up without a role model, blah blah blah. All that silly nonsense.

But I think I turned out just fine all things considered.

I simply shrug my shoulders and stare at the crumbs and burned kernels in my bowl.

Lick the tip of my finger and dab at them, showing her that I'm bored out of my mind.

Somebody at the bar calls her name and she tells him to fuck off and puts on her shoes.

Stabs her cigarette into the overstuffed ashtray.

Asks me if I want anymore popcorn.

Mugsy does three funerals. Then he takes some more Northfield Mount Herman kids to Interskate 91. He tells me he gets to keep the limo

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overnight because he has to make a run to Bradley International Airport wickered early in the morning. We hop onto 116. Mugsy looks straight ahead and keeps his can of beer down when a statie pulls up alongside us at a red light. I keep mine down too. The fat fucking no-neck trooper eyeballing us, sizing us up for sure.

I smell bacon, I say.

Mugsy laughs at a joke that never gets old.

The light turns green and the statie follows us close until around Bub's Bar-B-Q.

Then he accelerates with blue gumballs flashing and is long gone in a matter of seconds.

Then we play poker with Dutch Syska and Eugene Canning in the booth at the pharmacy. Alice brings us strawberry frappes and a bowl of French fries that we pour ketchup onto one at a time. Mugsy wins two dollars and we leave it on the table and go next door to the packy. Big Ben sneaks us a twelver of tall boys out the back. He calls us the Future Fuckups of America. Mugsy tells him to kiss our hairy asses. Then there are a couple nip-size bottles of Jack Daniels in the console bar in the white stretch. We drink them too. Mugsy puts the AC on full blast and drives down Long Plain Road, onto Whately Road parallel to the Connecticut River that stinks and then he pulls off into some of Walter Sadoski's corn that must be nine feet tall.

We listen to Def Leppard singing "Pour Some Sugar on Me" and pound some beers.

Then Mugsy takes two more out of the cooler.

These are goin down good, he says.

We sit there with the windows up and the engine idling, the AC, the loud music.

What should we do now, Mugsy says in between songs.

Then he gives me his goofy look that always makes me nervous.

I tell him let's ride into Hamp so we can make fun of the hippies and the homos.

That snaps him out of it.

All right, he says.

What the fuck, he says.

It's something to do. Better than working for a living. He hits me on the arm and his knuckles are hard and flat from punching the heavy bag he keeps chained to a cross beam in his father's garage; when he can't sleep at night he'll jump rope and then smack that thing for hours.

Mugsy revs the engine and follows FarmAll tractor tracks past row after row of corn. The river is a blue gash that keeps South Deerfield from spilling down Sugarloaf Mountain and into the center of Sunderland. A couple busloads of Puerto Ricans from Holyoke and West Springfield are picking strawberries at Nourse Farms for \$2.50 an hour. They wear white

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tshirts wrapped around their heads or hanging from the backs of their pants. A few of them look at us and cough at the dirt the limo kicks up; they'll wander into town on payday and we'll have to fuck them up for taking away our summer jobs. Last year Mugsy made two hundred bucks a week picking tobacco; it pisses him off just thinking about it. Fucking spics. Then the back tires screech onto the blacktop and round brown flies spread their kamikaze guts on the windshield.

Rich kids from New York and California come to Franklin County every fall for the fancy schools. Millionaire parents wanting their babies safe and away from the dangers of big cities. That's all fine and good but it's clear that they look down their noses at people like us.

People who live here by default.

We're not real to them.

We don't seem to matter much.

As though we're fucking invisible.

A couple girls are smoking cigarettes, sitting in the grass in front of the used record store.

I can tell they're not local.

I can always tell.

We pull up against the curb.

Hey there ladies, Mugsy says.

They look at us and each other and giggle. Mugsy tells them to come along for a ride. So just like that they climb in back and the pretty one asks right off what we have for them to drink.

Mugsy laughs and shifts into drive.

Then the pretty one looks at me.

How come you get this fancy car with a driver, she says.

What a fucking retard.

You somebody famous? she asks.

I tell her I'm going to be famous someday. I tell her my daddy set up a trust fund. I tell her Mugsy is my bodyguard and he knows karate and he has a black belt and always packs heat. I tell her I'm at UMass studying to be an astronaut; just taking up space. Mugsy laughs and adjusts the rear-view mirror and the girls look at each other and giggle some more. They know I'm full of shit but they play along. It's make-believe time. They know we'll say anything to get into their panties and we know they're slumming and everybody wants the same thing in the end.

Mugsy buys a couple four-packs of wine coolers at Watroba's. The pretty one rides shotgun and I stay in back with the other one who looks better up close. She smells nice too. She doesn't smell like any girl I've ever known. I tell her so and she says I'm sweet. Her name is Abby and they're freshmen at Smith College. It's starting to get dark and Mugsy drives to the maze; a network of tall hedges with dead ends and turnarounds. It's a

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well known make-out spot. We park the car. I know the course by heart but don't admit it and Abby holds my leather belt so I don't lose her. We get to the middle and she lets me kiss her and she tastes like cherry-flavor Lifesavers. We sit under the orange moon and touch each other outside our clothes a little bit and she asks me if I really go to UMass. I confess that I'm not even old enough yet and she tells me I sure seem old enough. I ask what she means by that and she says I have an old spirit.

She says it with a certain amount of reverence.

She says some people get old before their time because of what they experience at an early age. It could be anger or pain or frustration. The deep feeling that they have been wronged in some horrible fashion. It could be that they truly were abused or neglected when they were children, in a vulnerable state. So what happens is they basically skip past their childhood. She calls these people Old Souls. It sounds like she's reciting something she's learned in a book.

It sounds clinical.

She doesn't know what the fuck she's talking about.

Not really.

Not yet.

I tell her maybe that's true about what happens.

And that if it doesn't fucking kill you, well, you know the rest.

She giggles but not the same as before.

She senses that something has suddenly changed in me.

That I can't swallow my anger down like a bitter pill any longer.

Her pretty friend calls out but I know Mugsy will keep her busy and they won't interrupt me. Fat black crickets chirp like sentries protecting us. Then she grabs onto my wrist when I'm messing with the small white buttons of her blouse and she tells me that I have all that oldness but also the impatient hands of a high school boy. Abby or whatever her real name is wants to keep on talking but I'm all done talking. I hold her arms together behind her head with my left hand. She says she doesn't want to do it, but that's a fucking lie. And I'm tired of all the lies.

Then she puts up a good fight for a college girl.