

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/3

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Spooks

I was waiting in line at the MickeyMart when I heard this noise. I knew it right away, but only because I've heard it before: a choked moan, like a dog with a muzzle on trying to bark. I knew it was somebody with their jaw clenched tight, trying to keep that sound inside.

I looked over my shoulder and yes, that noise came from a grown woman's throat. She stood in line behind me with the noise leaking out of the corners of her mouth. Between us was a black woman carrying soda and a loaf of bread.

When they thought I was crazy and I lived in the hospital, there was a boy on my floor who made noise. He couldn't help it. In the middle of the night or any other time he might start up roaring or shouting out cuss words because he had Tourette's. This lady in the store had it too, and the black lady was her caretaker or something.

"Hesh up." She wasn't angry. I could tell by the way she said it she knew the Tourette's woman couldn't help herself. There was a black man with them too, and a white man with short messy hair who kept his face clenched up tight. It looked like it hurt. I paid for my groceries and left. In the parking lot I saw them all piling into a white van outside.

I only got out because somebody brought a dog to my floor, a Lab named Max. Ever since my parents and brother died when I was six I hadn't talked to anyone, but I talked to the dog. Then I talked to the lady who brought him about the dog and I wasn't crazy and they let me go live with Aunt Joyce until I was old enough to move out. Mrs. Tolliver got me my job at the vet clinic and every two weeks I go to her office and tell her I'm OK. And mostly I am OK.

But they'll take me back to the hospital and put me in Rehab if anybody finds out I drink so much. I'm not eighteen till June and my parents are dead, so they can put me wherever they want, even though I'm not crazy.

I always knew I wanted to drink. Ever since I was little, when I saw drunk people on TV I thought That looks fun even if they were making fools of themselves or getting in trouble. No matter what other people thought of them, it seemed to me they were doing things they secretly wanted to do but didn't dare until they got drunk. And it always worked out. They were embarrassed the next day was all. I guess I never thought about what being that embarrassed might feel like, but I know now.

I got too drunk last night and let Patrick fuck me. I didn't want to. I thought he'd just bring over the beer and I'd pay him for my half and we'd watch TV and kiss on my sofa for a while and he'd go home like always. But he put his hand up under my shirt. I liked that and I liked his mouth there too but I didn't want to take my pants off. Something inside me wanted to, but I didn't. And that thing inside me never got what it wanted, even though we fucked. I was so drunk it didn't even really feel like anything.

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I met Patrick because of beer, in the MickeyMart. The people there are nice. If I run out of food for me or the cats before payday, they let me take it anyway and I pay them when my check comes. They keep track on a piece of paper bag with ELLEN on the top. But they won't sell me beer. I'm not old enough to buy it.

One time when I tried to buy beer, Patrick was in line behind me. I didn't notice him. I don't notice people much and they don't notice me. Outside of work people don't talk to me much. Once in a while clients might, but I don't recognize right off if their pets aren't with them.

But he followed me outside and said "Hey!" as I walked toward my apartment. I ignored him. People who yell "Hey!" are never talking to me unless they want to ask for my change, and I didn't have any.

Then he said "Hey Girl in the scrubs," because that's what I have to wear to work even though I mostly just clean up. At least he didn't say Hey Dog Girl arf arf owoooo! like kids did all through school. They made up a story I was raised by dogs, but it isn't true.

He ran to catch up.

"Here," and he held out two six-packs.

I don't like it when people talk to me, especially if I don't know them. I said, "I don't have any money."

"We can split it." I noticed his eyes then. They aren't the icy scary kind of blue you see right through but a darker, deeper blue with a little calm gray in it, like a kitten's before they turn yellow. They looked friendly.

We got in his car. I know I shouldn't have done that. He drove to the park and we sat there drinking and watching the raccoons raid the big garbage can with the wood slats around it so they can't dump it over. Patrick slid his arm around my shoulders. I didn't know what to do about that. It made a tingle inside me, a little like the time I turned on the grooming clippers and they shocked me. I couldn't let go of them for the longest time and then finally I threw them. There was something different about this tingle, though. I couldn't decide if I liked it or not. I let his arm stay there while I was trying to decide so he wouldn't think I was rude.

That first night when he leaned over and put his face right in mine I grabbed the door handle and fell right out of the car. I know that sounds dumb, but I never thought about someone kissing me. That stuff's for other people, the ones who can talk to each other instead of dogs. The people who aren't messed up like me. I had already drunk five beers anyway and I wanted to go home. So he drove me there. Ever since then he comes over a few nights a week and we each drink a quart while he watches wrestling on my TV.

When I woke up this morning Patrick was gone and I was sore down there and my head hurt so bad the inside of my skull was singing. That little stray dog that keeps hanging around here was sitting by the back door crying or I might not have woke up in time. I keep telling that dog I don't want a dog. I tried to eat some breakfast but when I looked at the food all I could do was run to the bathroom to throw up. I wanted to go

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back to bed so bad, but it's Tuesday. I never got so drunk the night before a workday. Maybe never.

My first time. It's supposed to be so special and I barely remember it. You're supposed to love the guy and maybe go out to dinner beforehand and have soft music playing. I hope I don't have to have a baby now. They kind of scare me, but if one smiles at me I feel my insides light up. I couldn't have one though. People would make fun of it because it was mine.

Anyway I came to work with that on my mind and I went right back to the kennel. The dogs barked Hi Hi Ellen Hi Ellen Breakfast all at once. So loud, and I was too ashamed of myself to say anything back. I always tell the dogs what I've been up to, especially Sam the blood donor dog who lives at the clinic. I say something like, "I had a good night, did you?" But this morning I didn't say anything, just put them out in the cement yard one by one while I cleaned their cages and put in fresh food and water. First the A-Ward dogs in their two walls of cages four high. A-Ward is for the sick or hurt ones and some boarders. Then the biggest dogs in the cement runs. Then the B-Ward dogs, boarders and the dogs that come in for baths and dips.

The last ward is Iso, for parvo dogs and cats with feline AIDS or leukemia. It's a tiny room, like a big closet with a wall of cages in it. When I got to Iso, I poured out the dirty pine cleaner water and mixed up a bucket of bleach water. That's the only thing that kills parvo. It's still May, so we only had one parvo puppy, Jasmine Pelligrino. I moved her from her bloody-diarrhea cage to a clean one. Her front paws were slippery with vomit. She felt too sick to hold herself up, so she just hung in my arms. The parvo smell upset my stomach and the bleach water made me dizzy.

I got all the bath-and-dips done and put them in the dryer two at a time. Nothing bigger than a Golden Retriever. They hurt my back picking them up, but this one was Bo Brodie, who jumps in the tub by himself and smiles by lifting his lip off his front teeth like a person. When other dogs do that they mean Back off or I'll bite you, but not Bo.

While I worked the assistants brought back dogs and cats or took them away. I felt a little better so I said "Bye, Mookie" and "Bye, Snowball" and "Hey, Harley." Then Morgan the vet tech put her head through the door and asked me to come help her up front. We have an intercom, but it's broken.

Two of the Stokely Kennels men were there, the black one with the bum hip and the only white man who handles the Stokely dogs. The Stokely people breed and train dogs to race at Southland Greyhound Park across the river in West Memphis. Sometimes other clients say, "You know those dogs, which ones should I bet on?" but I won't tell them who's fastest and I won't go to Southland.

The men each held a fawn greyhound pup by the leather collar. The puppies were almost grown, maybe nine or ten months old. They pulled at the men's arms and screamed. The bad hip man said, "You just don't know, do you, Babies?"

Greyhounds are always well-trained and well-behaved, but these were

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different. They yelled What's happening? and Don't touch me! The men looked sad. The white man said, "We can't do nothin' with'em." Morgan and I put leads on the pups and dragged them back to the kennel.

When we went back the men had two more, the same pale red-brown color with the same black muzzles. Then two more after that. We put them all in one run. They bunched up in the corner like I imagine a herd of deer might do and whipped their heads from side to side, looking for a way out.

When Morgan told me not to bother with blankets, I knew we had to kill them all. Greyhounds that stay with us for surgery or boarding lie on thick blankets because their skin is so thin. Before she said that I thought these would be going home again because they kept their leather collars.

Greyhounds usually act so polite, like they're used to living in a mansion but not bothered that they have to come here. I hate helping kill them, even these that didn't have any manners.

"What's wrong with them?"

The puppies screamed I don't understand!

"Spooks," said Morgan. "They don't know dogs and people have a deal." Dr. Samuels says a long time ago a person made a deal with a wolf, and now we have to treat dogs right and keep our half of the bargain.

When they heard Morgan's voice, the puppies froze and stared at us with their muscles tensed and their ears straight up like rabbits'.

"They'll never socialize--never trust people. Once in a while dogs just get born that way." She thought I didn't know that word "socialize," but I do. It's what I wasn't doing in the hospital when I wouldn't talk to people.

After Morgan left I said, "I'm sorry, Pups." They all ran to the back of the run again and started up the walls. What is this place? they screamed and Why? They couldn't understand a word I said.

I punched out for lunch. I walked down the block to Tops Bar-B-Que and ate real fast and smoked three cigarettes (the long ones, 100s). I sat there thinking about last night and wondering why I drank so much when I knew I had to work today. I said "No, no," and then all of a sudden "Yes." I just decided yes. I couldn't figure out why. It's not fair to be hung over and still drunk in the morning and go to work. Something awful might happen to some dog or cat because I couldn't pay attention. But I said "What the Hell," and opened the second quart and Patrick said, "That's my girl." He can get as drunk as he wants; he doesn't have a job. He lives with his parents.

Three long cigarettes after I finish eating means the hour is over, so I went back to work. I still felt bad but not as terrible as before I ate.

Dr. Samuels said, "Ellen, meet me in the back room with one of the Stokely dogs, please."

I opened the run and the pups all ran for the back wall at the same time like a flock of birds. They knew by now they couldn't run far enough up the walls to get out, but they tried anyway.

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I shut the barred metal door behind me. When I talked gently the pups screamed louder, so I shut up and grabbed a collar. Nobody bit. Nobody tried to run by me. They tried to melt into the corners of the run.

I dragged the pup through B-Ward to the back room. The autoclave and its big steam generator cabinet are there, and a steel table folds down off the wall for giving fluids to parvo dogs. There are four ways out of this little room: into Iso, into B-Ward, into the front hallway to the exam rooms, and out the back door. The puppy would go out the back door and into the big gray plastic barrel.

Dr. Samuels came in from the hallway with the bottle of pink stuff and the big syringe that only gets used for the pink stuff. No other drug in the clinic is bright pink, on purpose. I hugged the pup's head to me with my right arm and slid my left arm around his shoulder. As Dr. Samuels picked up his left forefoot, I held off the vein in his left leg with my thumb, pressing down and rolling it to the outside so the vein popped up.

The pup was still screaming, not out loud, but with his shoulders and legs. People think dogs only talk with their tails and voices, but they use everything.

Dr. Samuels reached up to pat the pup's head before he slid the needle in. Nobody likes doing this if the animal is healthy. It doesn't matter how many times you've done it. The puppy jerked his head away.

Dr. Samuels gave him the shot and he went limp in my arms. I lowered him to the cement floor. Dr. S slapped his chest, found no stethoscope there, and went to get it to make sure the pup was dead. I felt behind his front leg with my fingers. Nothing. I tapped his muzzle right by his eye. Nothing. Then I put my finger on his eyeball, which was starting to dry already. He didn't blink. I took the lead off and walked toward B-ward. I wanted to cry, but I couldn't do it. I brought back the next one. The next one. The next one. The next one. As each one died I dragged it aside by the paws and lay it by the back door. I wanted to take each one out before the next one, so the others wouldn't see, but Dr. Samuels said it would take too much time. I think he wanted to get all that killing over with so he could leave the little room. I didn't blame him.

I felt really bad for that last pup darting around the run by itself crying Why? It was a bitch pup, and she wouldn't stand still. I had to lay her down and hold her still on her side with my arm across her neck while Dr. Samuels stuck her in the heart. I hate that. He did the awful thing he does to make sure she was dead, left the syringe there until it quit jumping.

Morgan helped me carry them out. When we dropped them in the barrel they curled up together like they were sleeping. I don't remember much about the rest of the day.

I've worked for Dr. S. two years now, but I don't have any pets. I feed two cats that come around, and I had my own dog once, but he got HBC, that's Hit By Car, because I didn't teach him to walk on a leash. I didn't know any better then. It's been a long time, but I just haven't wanted another one. There are so many things that can happen to them. And I didn't keep my end of the deal.

After I walked home and put the groceries away, I went out back to

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feed the cats. They waited quietly on my little fenced patio, the black and white one and the orange mackerel tabby. I never try to pat them because they aren't tame. I just put the food in the bowls and gave them fresh water. I sat in the white plastic chair for a while, watching them eat and watching the moths zoom around the light bulb and smash into it and zoom some more. I have to wait till the cats finish eating and take the food bowl away or that little stray dog will chase them off and eat it all.

Like he knew I was thinking of him, the dog sidled into the light and sat down a few feet away. The cats kept right on eating. A funny little yellow dog, all alert, with a curled tail and ears that start up and then fall down at the tips. I don't know what breeds are in him. I don't know how he keeps getting onto my patio either, unless he wiggles through the gaps between the slats of the fence.

What's my name? he said, licking the end of his nose.

"I can't name you," I said. "You're not my dog."

But if I were? He said that by starting to stand up, but sitting down again and arranging his front paws on the cement in front of him after they were set down.

When I looked at him, all I could see was a needle sliding into his vein and his wet brown eyes drying out and going whitish.

"Get out of here," I said. "Can't you see this is cat food?"

But when the cats were done eating and washing themselves I let him have the leftovers like always. Then I took the bowls inside and put them in the sink and looked at the phone. I wanted to call Patrick and tell him not to come over. I wanted to be by myself, but I knew I wouldn't sleep if I didn't get some beer.

At eight Patrick knocked on the door. When I answered it he stood there like always, with his smile that's higher on one side than the other and his sleepy eyes, like nothing happened last night.

"Hey Babe, 's'up?"

I shrugged and stepped back so he could come in. He had a paper bag in each arm: four quarts instead of two again.

"I don't want that much tonight," I told him. "I threw up this morning."

Patrick was putting the beer in the fridge. He sounded like he had his head down the big gray barrel when he said, "Whatever. It'll keep." I heard bottles clinking. He brought two into the den. I was sitting in the chair instead of on the sofa. Patrick didn't like that. He acted like he didn't care though.

The first swallow of beer is the best, so sweet and so cold it burns the back of my throat. I set the bottle down for a second. Then I picked it up again, tipped it back, and drank and drank, with the bubbles running glug glug up to the bottom of the bottle, until my stomach told me to stop.

I hadn't turned on the TV since I got home. Patrick looked around for the remote.

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“Wrestling’s on.”

Anyone could tell I needed to cry. Sam knew when I fed him. He jumped up and licked my cheek where there weren’t any tears: I’m sorry Ellen what’s wrong Ellen? But Patrick didn’t notice. If he noticed things he wouldn’t have to have the Dog Girl for a girlfriend. Not that he’s really my boyfriend. We never go anywhere. I never cared before because there’s nowhere I want to go.

He found the remote, clicked on the TV, and picked his channel. Then he slouched back on my sofa with his feet on my coffee table.

“Army of Two are gonna kick The Dream Team’s ass.”

He wasn’t acting. Patrick really didn’t care. As long as he got to sit around where his parents couldn’t see him and drink he didn’t care whether he touched me or not.

“Get out of here.”

He just looked at me. I almost expected him to tip his head to one side and whine.

“I said get out.”

He looked angry, then like he might cry. He got up and stomped off into my kitchen. I got there just in time to see him open my refrigerator door and reach inside.

“Leave that here.” I held out a twenty-dollar bill, lots more than all that beer cost. Patrick took it and stuffed it into his pocket. He opened the kitchen door to leave. Then he pulled the bill back out, straightening it with his fingers, and set it on the kitchen counter by the door without turning around.

“That’s OK,” he said and left. Not another word.

I sat on the sofa for a little while and looked at the black TV screen and drank. I thought about that Two Ret woman. How if you don’t talk like me, you don’t socialize, and if you talk when you shouldn’t like her you aren’t socialized either.

Before I knew it, that whole first quart was gone. When I went to the fridge for the second one I couldn’t walk straight. Good. I opened the sliding glass door to my little patio. The moths zoomed away from and whipped right back at the light like they were tied to it on strings they kept forgetting about.

This time I saw the little dog wiggle through the slats. He had worry-wrinkles in his forehead like a Basenji, like he had a lot on his mind. He came over and sat on the toes of my right foot.

“You don’t want to be my dog, I’m a bad owner,” I said.

You’re good. The he whined without opening his mouth to say Please. The whine came out the corners and made the little flaps at the front of his upper lip jump.

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I took the top off the second quart and tilted it back. I was going to feel bad tomorrow, but I wouldn't throw up. There was one more quart of beer for tomorrow night. After that there wouldn't be any more.

"Come on in, Max," I told him.