

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

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Confessions on The Verge of Icy Death.

Lucian pokes two more tiny sticks into the mini woodstove and then closes the door and raises his hands to the heat making a vocalization which is almost words. It sounds a little like “Ahhh-shit-ahh” but with a hint at the self knowledge of how silly it sounds. Francis smirks at it then aims his gaze out the window of the ice shack, raking it over all the traps one by one, looking for a raised flag. There are none, so he exhales slowly and gives the pipe over to Lucian.

Lucian sucks the rank smoke and holds it. With his breath held he squeaks out the words “I’m good” and hands back the empty pipe to Francis. They aren’t stoned and don’t want to get that way. They wash the taste out of their mouths with coffee which is spiked with Jameson’s Irish whiskey, and they don’t want to be drunk either. They are just relaxing.

Wind shrieks across the frozen lake and swirls around, lifting snow into the shape of a funnel; the funnel dances across the augured holes and against Lucian’s huge old Impala and lingers awhile as if hesitant to go, as if it might hear a story.

Hey man, says Lucian, let’s play a pretend game.

Francis says let’s play a real game instead. What’cha got? Cards? Francis knows he is a little bit smarter than Lucian, and always has been. He sees implications more quickly, makes connections faster and then says the results in a joke. It might be why they have been friends for so long. They aren’t equal and they know it. Francis feels superior for his brain. Lucian feels superior because he knows he has a bigger heart. Both, feeling superior, can forgive the other nearly anything.

Lucian says, No, not cards. Let’s play a game of pretending like when we were kids and you’d say I’m a spaceman, right? And you are an alien with, with, and then I’d say with a huge blasty raygun of awesome power and I can change my shape and then you’d say...like that. Let’s play.

Francis sees that this is going somewhere so he shrugs and says yes okay lets do it after I get back from clearing the ice from the traps. He shrugs into his coat and takes the skimmer and does his rounds. At each hole he busts the thin sheet of ice from the hole and then scoops it out before going to the next.

When he comes back to the shack and climbs out of his coat, Lucian tugs his beard and starts.

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We are in the Impala going about 80 or so, just flying, right? And I hit the brakes and cut the wheel so we are spinning like Dorothy inside the tornado. We are screaming across the ice and we are laughing out loud but getting really dizzy too.

When Francis sees that the car is getting too close to the mouth of Sandy Stream, where the ice is thin because of the current, he says to Lucian ah, um, hey man lets. But there is nothing to say after lets.

Lucian sees where they are. He lets off the brake and cuts the wheel the other way. He tries to control the crazy skid by pumping the gas, but the wheels get no purchase at all and the car careens across the ice.

The ice gives way as if it was never even there, not any cracks or heaves nor great loud crunches, just one second they are spinning and the next sinking. Both know they only have moments to thrust a door open against the water pressure. Lucian knows all too well, having had a car accident years earlier in his twenties when the car flipped over the guardrail and into the Dolby Flowage. He managed to unroll his window so everyone escaped drowning but it was a close call. Sometimes he still climbs into a car and feels panic for no good reason.

The car dives toward the bottom like a a pearl diver holding a stone, racing toward the bottom as if treasure were down there. The electric windows won't work, and neither will the doors open. Lucian and Francis rise over the seat and pop their heads into a huge air pocket at the back window. Only their heads are above water. They are shivering with such violence they can only breathe or talk with concerted effort.

Lucian says, we're gonna die really soon.

Francis says I know it.

Lucian says, I need to tell you something before we die.

You better hurry.

You know I love you right? You know I'd never do. But he doesn't finish the thought because he did and he is about to confess it.

Francis says though teeth chattering so hard they might break against

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each other. Says, spill it.

Lucian sobs it out. I shouldn't tell you. I shouldn't cause you pain before we die but I have to man, I have to.

Francis reaches over and strokes a finger along his cheek like a child.

Even as kids they were best at death scenes. The wounded cowboy croaking out through his death bleeding mouth how the other should: Go on! Just go on and leave me here! One of us must survive! I'll hold 'em off! Lucian would tell the boy Francis. It was almost always the case that Lucian would sacrifice and Francis would get all stoic and go ahead and save the day.

Lucian says, me and Amy! He blurts it out as if the names together are enough to tell the story complete. To add time and date to the implication obvious and painful he yelps New Years! And he is so ashamed he lets his head sink into the bitter cold water until the pain as bitter as a hammer blow forces his head back up.

Amy is Francis' wife. They married while both seniors in high school right before Lucian and Francis shipped out for the navy under the buddy system. Francis was eager for adventure, but he loved Amy and he was desperate to maintain some control over her before he left. He so feared losing her that he needed to marry, to get some document and some official sanction of their relationship, some social pressure to make sure she was there when he came back. And she was.

How much air you think we got?

We'll die before we run out. The cold. We have minutes.

Francis tries to smirk but fails. I know what you did. I saw.

Lucian can't tell if it's just the shivers or if he is shaking his head. He knows he doesn't understand.

Francis says, sometimes, I love you man, but sometimes you just keep talking and I don't want to talk so when we're drinking or whatever I just pretend I'm asleep. So New Years I laid back and pretended I was passed out on the couch and I saw Amy come across the room to give you a hug and I knew.

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This is what I knew. Amy is like most I guess and you are this way too how you knew what you were going to do someday but had to wait for the story we tell ourselves to be right. When we were kids Amy would never let me fuck her with a condom on because condoms mean preplanning and girls who preplan sex are sluts. We had to risk pregnancy every time we fucked because she needed that story. I seen in her eyes that story coming together and I knew when she hugged you what would happen and it did. You guys pulled your heads back and you had to pretend it was spontaneous instead of the truth which is you were on the edge of it for years and you kissed.

Lucian almost talked but didn't. Then he said, if I drown myself, you'll have more air.

Francis said we're both dead. Listen. You kissed my wife like an addict. Like you were drowning in it. I was looking out from between my eyelashes and crying and I was paralyzed. And then you both were naked right in front of me, fucking right in front of my eyes. I saw you penetrate her and I saw you taste her breast and right then I had the strength, I think, maybe to move but then Amy said I love Francis! And you said it too and you were both crying and you said I love Francis while you fucked the brains out of my wife and I stayed there and I didn't move and I felt more guilt than either of you.

Lucian said. Fuck, slow and drawn out because he didn't know how to say what he felt which was like he had been hung on the gallows but freed at the same time.

Lucian said, The Cuss gun! Like it was their salvation, which maybe it was. He always kept a .22 in the glove box when they went fishing because he couldn't stand taking the hook out of a Cuss, which was the ugliest fish alive looking like a cross between an eel and a catfish with the slime of both. Lucian always just shot them in the head.

Francis said fuck you man, we're gonna die. Do you forgive me?

Lucian said, I would but I don't know what that means. I don't even know which part was wrong.

Francis sighs. Me neither. Get the gun.

Lucian holds his breath and dives. The cold feels like a steel spike driven into his brain. The pain is brighter than anything he has ever wit-

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nessed. He feels for the glove box. In the impala it is as big as a cupboard. The pain has blinded him but he finds it. He pulls out the gun and rises to the air pocket and shoots out the window. They float up still inside the air bubble, for real, heads right inside an air bubble like in a cartoon.

There is an ice shack not far away. They manage to get there with their clothes freezing stiff around them and their limbs going numb. Lucian stops shivering which he knows is a terrible sign because it means his core temperature is far too low and he is on the verge of death. Inside the shack is a kerosene heater which they start and turn to high and then they strip out of the clothes and huddle together under a blanket.

Francis spoons Lucian under the blanket. Lucian begins to shiver which is good because it means his core temperature is raising enough for him to feel cold but also the movement is causing heat in Francis. Like how Amy needed that story of not a slut like how Lucian needed the story of New Years and drunk and together lonely, left behind by Francis passed out too early. Like all those stories Francis and Lucian find their other story. They warm each other with vigorous movement.

Finally, after having not said a word for hours. Francis says, well dude, I'm pulling the traps.

Lucian says good idea. You pull the traps and I'll watch you do it. Francis smirks and he packs up.

When they climb into the car and start across the ice, Lucian says, "Goddamn good thing I had that gun, hey?"

Francis says, "Goddamn."

David Bulley has published short fiction in Night Train, Heat City Review, Porcupine, McSweeney's, Portland Monthly, and in many other fine magazines.