

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/1

Rusty Barnes
The Green Man

Dad says Bandy's our watchdog now that he's too old to hunt, but he just seems like a wore-out hound to me, which is what Toke calls him. Mom and Dad are on their way to the Troy Fair to see Moe Bandy tonight. He comes every year and plays for a couple hours, then hangs out at the back of the beer tent with Dad and some of the other men from the Lion's Club. Ma goes to the scrapping booth and sits with the other women. They left Toke in charge, though, and I'm fucked because of it. It's Friday night and I won't be able to watch anything because they'll want NASCAR or the stereo on. I might as well sleep with Bandy on the shoes and boot by the front door for all the nothing I'll get to do tonight.

Toke's an asshole, is the thing. He's my brother, and there's brotherly love sometimes if I agree to keep my mouth shut, but I've never met anyone more set on having a good time, and doing nothing in his life, like work, to get it. First thing home from school and his books go blingo onto the front porch glider and he lights one cigarette, and puts another behind his ear for someone, punches AC/DC into the stereo, and then he dials the phone, to see which girl's pants he can get into. He runs them all down in a line from the list he scratched into the drywall until he gets one that will come over. I admire it, but he is not really nice to these girls, so I wonder why they come over. He's bad, and girls like the greaser kids, the Future Farmers of America boys, the smoking barrel ones.

I have to deal with it every day. He's got those ears he covers up with hair as long as dad will let him grow it, down the collar, so he's bad. And he gets away with it. Me, I get to be the good one. Teachers every year shake and stutter when they take roll and get to my name, because of Toke. Then they find out I'm everything Toke isn't. It's like being the green man greeting the leader of the humans in some old movie: nobody knows what he'll do, but everybody's watching him, wondering.

A bunch of Toke's boys are coming over tonight. They'll sit outside, lean against the car and drink Budweiser out of the refrigerator. Along about dark somebody will realize in their drunk-dumb way that Dad will miss the beer, and two of them who look the oldest—probably Screwjob and Lawrence, who's about six four or something—will drive to Elmira and get someone to buy them replacement beer. I thought of this beforehand. I dunno why they can't. But the thing is, they're going to come inside on the porch and light the couple punk sticks and set up the card table and play euchre. It's what they do every night they get together, euchre or UNO or whatever game they can find, Monopoly even if they're desperate.

Like a ritual, Toke will set up the coffee can spittoons and pull out the corn chips and whatever else he can find to eat and lay it out on the sideboard in the kitchen, and he'll pull his special cards out of his glove box. He keeps them in a plastic baggie filled with baby powder, so they'll stay handleable. Then he'll tell me to get lost and I'll go upstairs and read or

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something, leave the window open so I can smell the night and hear the crickets and the treefrogs. Long about midnight, one o'clock, or as soon as they run out of beer, Ma and Dad will be home and they'll see Toke and his friend sitting there calm as can be. The pot will have already been smoked and the boys, Toke and Ricky and Screwjob and Lawrence will yessir nosir Dad and talk about going hunting or taking to Canandaigua Lake to catch the smelt run. Maybe Dad and Mom will sit in on a game when Ricky and Screwjob leave. Lawrence's got nowhere to go since his parents left for Colorado, so he basically stays with Toke. Everybody goes to bed and no one knows what shit Toke pulls. I have to do nothing and say nothing or get my ass beat. Not good.

Tonight, though, it turns out different because Marcy and Suzanne are here. They live—Marcy does anyway, I dunno where Suzanne lives—three fields away if you cut diagonally through the wood behind Baker's. They've never showed up together, and tonight they have a couple other girls with them. Marcy's the leader, though. She's a big girl around the chest. I mean. It's hard. I mean difficult not to notice them. She's wearing Toke's FFA jacket, which I take to mean they're going out, though I don't know what Toke does when he leaves here, what Marcy would want to hang out here for.

I don't know why Suzanne's here. She's nearly as smart as I am. She has these little glasses on the end of her nose she has to keep pushing up and this long brown hair to her butt. She keep it in a ponytail, whips it around real quick at Screwjob when he picks at her. When I switch over to the small bus on the way to school she's already on it, and I sit by her, but I don't say much. I just like the way she smells.

I don't know these two other girls, but it's not hard to figure out. They're just the ones here for Ricky and Screwjob while Toke and Lawrence are for Marcy and Suzanne. They're just girls. I don't even hear their names from where I'm sitting underneath the porch watching them. I know something's up, though, because Toke hasn't got any dip in. I wonder if Toke will have the hair to fuck them here, but he doesn't, it turns out. They all pair off and go back into the woods, where Toke and I have made dirt-bike trails that can take you the entire twenty miles to Troy, or ten to Elmira, and not take you within a mile of the road at any point.

I give it ten minutes, go back in and get my dad's five-cell power lamp—feels like a club in my hand—and Mama's disc camera. I'll fix that fucker this time. I follow the bottom trail that leads into the old cherry orchard. There's a bench there Toke uses to do his business with Marcy, and I'm glad for a minute until I understand that means Suzanne is with Lawrence. I don't need the light yet. I can see two shadows sort of bumping together, but it sounds like crying. It sounds like Marcy. Toke says to her to shut up, but she's getting more hysterical by the minute. I'm afraid to cut on the light but I wonder if they've rolled into a snake or deershit or something. I shine the light right on them and Toke jumps off like he's been shot. Marcy is sitting there naked. I can see her titties and the dark hair between her legs, and Toke grabs his pants and runs off through the

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woods when he sees me, crashing through the underbrush like he's driving deer. When the noise stops I hear fierce whispering from down the hill, and more noise. Suzanne's coming up through now to help her friend, because Toke has told her to.

"He promised to shoot on my tummy. That asshole. What would he do if I got p.g.?" Marcy's arms are crossed across her boobs. Nothing, I thought, but didn't say. I don't even know if she's thinking about me as she's naked there, her chest heaving. Suzanne is here now, in just her undershirt and white panties, her legs all brier-scratched. I can't do anything but stare and try not to get hard. I wonder where the Ricky and Screwjob and Lawrence, the other two girls, have gone. I wish I could help but will Toke kick my ass if I do? I take off my jacket and hand it to Marcy, who just stares at it, then at me, and buries her head in Suzanne's shoulder, who is shushing her and holding her head in her smooth white hand that I can see even in the dark.

Bandy's deep clear bell-like tone bays from the house, and I know that Mama and Dad are home. Toke is down there trying to make it all seem normal, setting up the card table and the snacks. I wonder if he made it in time. The girls need to get home, and so do I. Fuck this. Fuck Toke.

"Go down this trail to the left. At the bottom by the woodpile cut left again hard and you can bushwhack about 400 feet and cut off one field." Suzanne nods at me. Marcy is snuffling a little. "You can keep the coat," I say, "But bring my Dad's lamp by when you can."

"You're a good kid, Randall." Suzanne brushes her lips across my forehead, almost naked as she is I can hardly stand it, and I watch as they disappear into the woods, Suzanne holding Marcy up by the shoulder, whispering in her ear as she goes. I turn back and down the main path, the one Toke calls Mohawk Path, all the different paths named for the Five Nations that lived around here long ago. Toke found an arrowhead here near the house once, but skipped it across the creek a day later.

"She's a good girl, Marcy is." Toke says, still in the shadows by the trellis and the bench. He flicks his cigarette out in the gravel with one strong finger. I can see the orange butt rolling every which way until it stops by the tire of his Nova. I wish I'd gone with them, with the girls. I don't get Toke. She might have really liked him.

I think of Marcy in my jacket and Suzanne holding her hand while in the other, my dad's five-cell lamp lights the way for them. I imagine Suzanne helping Marcy across the backfield, stumbling over the sharp stumps of corn and talking in low voices at each other, the light bobbing merrily through the woods, over the field, and past the hill where I can no longer see.

Dad coughs faintly as he props the screen door open with a cinderblock and goes inside with a beer from the porch fridge, and the driveway is suddenly flooded with light from the pole where mosquitoes and bats are circling, predator and prey and me.

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"She was a good girl," I yell back at Toke. As I walk in I can hear Dad begin to sing some old country song, his good reedy voice rattling off the house walls. I can't understand it except that it sounds lost.

Rusty Barnes lives in Revere MA with his family. Find out more about him at www.rustybarnes.com.