

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

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**Searchlight, Nevada**

It's Friday night, an annual banquet, Nolan's turn to be introduced. The Chamber of Commerce director — his personal friend, a client — steps to the microphone amid dainty coughs and the tinkling of stemware. A tap of his finger drums through the speakers. Nolan's described as a highly effective person, a man of ideas; he joins committees, chairs task forces.

"Here's everybody's go-to guy," the director says, with a sweep of his arm. "Nolan Boyd!"

Clapping ensues.

But Nolan's life is illusion. Late that evening, at home, he broods. His third wife, Ellen, still in her heels, conks out on the couch. He lies in bed with the light on, fingers his statuette, stares at a swirl on the ceiling that resembles the eye of a cat. When Nolan was a young man he journeyed to Central America and climbed a pyramid, caught his breath in the steaming crown of jungle trees rooted within its rubble. As he studies the spackle, he daydreams of returning. He builds a treehouse with a thatched roof and a floor of mahogany planks. He puffs cigars, sits alone with a talking parrot, listens to geckos making kissing sounds in the night.

On Saturday morning Ellen decides that they'll explore the new Walmart that materialized during the autumn in a pasture at the outskirts of town. Nolan imagines the halogen glare of its parking lot hypnotizing a satellite, drawing it mothlike through the atmosphere in a withering beam of flame and disintegration. The temperature is 19 degrees, the ground astir with skiffs of blowing snow. "I thought this could be like a date for us," Ellen says. Nolan passes a cattle trailer in the parking lot, catches the moist eye of a steer on its way to the slaughterhouse, and his heart moves.

The Supercenter shelves manifest a dizzying riot of imported gim-cracks, a heroin of cheapness. Sparrows enclosed during the construction flit through the rafters, survive on cookie crumbs strewn by careless children. The customers, an unfamiliar hoard, strike Nolan as hideous caricatures: Strumpets waddle, trinkets wedged in their pillowy navels; barbarians stalk the aisles in camouflage pants.

Ellen steps in front of Nolan and smooths his lapels. "Remember," she says. "Listen to your inner voice."

Strolling alone, Nolan examines an iPod behind a panel and compels an indifferent clerk to unlatch the locked cabinet. The kid sends the player up front to Customer Service, where, he says, Nolan can pay for it later. When Ellen finishes with her shopping, Nolan refuses to retrieve it himself and holds up the checkout line until the clerk heaves a sigh and shuts down her register. When the gadget arrives, Nolan smiles and tells her he's changed his mind.

As Ellen's cart passes through the exit, an alarm yelps. Nolan flares with menace at the sudden provocation. A chuckling greeter extends an apology, examines Ellen's receipt, accuses the clerk of flagrant ineptitude — only then does the accusatory tooting subside. As they go out the door,

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an unctuous stranger, loitering near the door with folded arms, appraises Nolan, asks, "How ya doin'?"

Amid fluttering wafers of snow, Nolan opens the trunk of Ellen's Taurus and encounters a cello, which she rents for \$40 a month from her instructor.

"That damn thing is worth \$1,200. It isn't something you store in a fucking walk-in freezer," Nolan snaps. An elderly woman peering from the adjacent stall recoils as though she's been goosed. Ellen bares her teeth. After Nolan apologizes and suggests going for lunch, she says, "No. I can tell you don't really want to. And besides, I'm not hungry anymore."

That afternoon Nolan sits vexed at his computer, cobbling a memoir. Ellen re-arranges canned goods, shelves matching holiday china, dusts the backs of pictures and the bottoms of chair legs. She develops a nagging cough. Nolan sighs and logs off. He downs a tumbler of whiskey and peers through the slats. After pulling on boots and mittens he fires up his snow-blower, casting an arching blizzard across the lawn. Ellen gestures approvingly from behind the glass. After he's finished, he slams the door, stamps his feet and says, "There. You happy now?"

When he awakens on Sunday morning, Ellen's gone. Her note says, "I'll be back after Christmas. Maybe."

Nolan disconnects the phone, nicks himself while shaving. He spends the day in pajamas, drinking beer and exploring Web sites, pursuing one intriguing link to the next until he's repelled by images of aberrant dwarves and misused vegetables. He awakens Monday in the grip of a hangover and feels the cold weight of a revolver in his hand. He sits up, startled, finds a bullet in its chamber, the hammer drawn back. He convinces himself that he had purchased this pistol, though he can't remember when. He pinches its barrel between thumb and forefinger and dangles it as if it's radioactive, restoring it to his gaping safe. Ellen's cat, wide-eyed, paces at the front door, padding in wary circles. He draws the chain and turns the knob. She hisses and darts outside.

On the kitchen counter stand 11 empty bottles, their caps strewn like loose change. He turns to the refrigerator to seek the last. Another note, pinned to the door behind a flowery porcelain magnet, reads: "P.S., There's hamburger patties in the freezer." Nolan pictures himself as Ellen might have encountered him: splayed, perforated, the dried maroon plume dammed by the ottoman.

"Yes," he says out loud. "I am a lucky man."

Within an hour, he fires his secretary, withdraws a wad of currency from his bank and buys himself a pair of dark glasses. He aims his Lincoln westward, ascending toward the Great Divide.

Three days later, Nolan awakens in a Las Vegas hotel. Beside him a dour companion lies on her back and smokes, her hair a black sunburst against the sheets. He considers her a moment, touches a telling rise on her belly. "Don't worry," she says. "It's not yours."

She has a Native American name, he recalls. Or maybe it's Rhonda. He can't remember which. He'll try Rhonda, if it comes to that. "Can I drive

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you home?" he asks. When she replies, "Tucson?" he's ensnared, a wasp in her web.

On Highway 99, ribbons of rhinestones litter the barren edges, the glimmering shards of countless bottles emptied and cast aside on the southbound road to Arizona. Nolan removes his sunglasses and rubs sweat from his eyes. Rhonda, silent for the past hour, cuts a sharp silhouette against the colorless backdrop of the mesas.

"I was thinking we could stay a few days in Lake Havasu City," Nolan says. "Maybe dance across London Bridge." He forces a smile, tries to sound cheerful.

She shifts in her seat and retracts the hems of her cotton shorts, letting sunlight play on her thighs. "I was thinking we'll need money soon," she says. "And you don't have any."

Nolan tightens his grip on the wheel. She'd hooked him with a story about growing up among joshuas and broken saguaros, her last night among them as a teen-age girl on a solitary walk along a reservation road. She scarcely remembers ... a battered van, an invitation ... whiskey, smoke, laughter. She awoke in the daylight to the whine of a solitary fly buzzing the crusted hair of her sex, a bare-backed youth wetting the roadside dust, well-muscled colts snoring on the seats and curled beside her on the carpet. She found her jeans in the dirt, panties at her ankle. At home she gathered a few things in a beaded bag and thumbed her way north, took the punches, made her own luck — smoldered like a bundle of sage, she said, until only cinders remained.

Nolan absorbs the story in a vivid and personal manner, as he imagines a woman might, pictures himself as a character in its impending chapters. They pull off the highway at Searchlight, a glowing oasis on the dark asphalt path, and check into a gray hotel turned pink by winking casino lights.

"Should you be doing that?" Nolan asks, when she lights a cigarette. She stands and hitches her purse strap over her shoulder. "You never know," she says, and walks into the night.

Nolan lingers to ponder his role, later enters the casino in character — a stranger — orders coffee from a bartender with a face like a clenched fist. Rhonda ignores him, sits before a slot machine, a man in a sport coat and tie hovering nearby. Nolan pegs him as a high school counselor. Rhonda presses her lips to her cigarette and wafts a slow stream of smoke through her nostrils.

"One generation is all it would take," the man says. "Would you know how to refine petroleum? I wouldn't. If you found a CD in the rubble you'd have no idea what it was. You'd hang it around your neck like a goddamn bauble."

She nods, her earrings swinging like tassels, catching the colors of the lights. She gives the arm of the bandit a tug. Her hard eyes meet Nolan's, hold him in their steady gaze.

Nolan retreats to the desert, sinks to his knees. Sharp pebbles cut his palms, the heat of the day still pulsing from the dry ground. He tells him-

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self that he could simply leave, start the Lincoln and drive. It would mean going home, watching bowl games from the comfort of his leather chair, never knowing Tucson. Nolan breathes deeply, stills his inner voice. He sits all night at the motel window, smashing flies against the pane.

Rhonda arrives with the dawn, giddy and loose, bearing a sack of coppery dollars. "I gambled," she says, a demure smile lifting the corners of her mouth. "I got lucky."

She spills the bounty onto the bed, peels off her tube top, kicks her shorts to the corner. When she reclines naked into the jackpot, Nolan succumbs. He kneels astride her, rests his chin among rosy abrasions in the swale of her breasts. Cologne lingers at the bend of her jaw, a hint of juniper on her breath. His senses kindle with excitement and an intuition of impending ruin. He's animated and uncertain. He jangles.

She stiffens, pushes him aside, says, "I need air."

She arises, willowy and gravid, and stands at the billowing curtain, fingers laced across her womb. Cool night air streams in. Years later, this stays with him: The mournful calls of unfamiliar birds, the daybreak filling her hair with its rufescent halo, the coins coming unstuck, one by one, falling from her back like spattering desert rain.