

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

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Pilgrim State

The phone startled Nate at that time of evening when Adel should have been clumping up the steps to their apartment as she returned from Norm's Diner, and he knew without answering that something terrible had happened.

His daughter's behavior had taken a decidedly downward turn. When she responded out loud to the imaginary voices she heard, her tone had become more troubled. Just the night before Adel had suddenly begun to bang her shoe on the inside of her bedroom door, crying "Keep away! Keep away!" Nate had managed to calm her by inviting her to listen to the radio with him and promising to whip up a sandwich. Adel tentatively emerged from her room in a large bathrobe pulled loosely around her, sporting a Brooklyn Dodgers cap yanked tightly over her head, and plopped herself in her usual chair. Nate fiddled with the dial until he found a rerun of Gunsmoke and immediately worried when he realized it involved a senseless murder. He remembered the episode: The Killer. Nate feared that the shootings in the story would reawaken the ghosts that Adel had been fighting, but she listened without affect, the inner noises apparently stilled. If anything, the confident, deep voice of William Conrad playing Marshal Matt Dillon helped to calm her. She ate the promised sandwich, but when the program ended she returned to her room, refusing to accept Nate's effort to talk about whatever had been disturbing her.

"Is that you Adel?" asked Nate, grabbing the telephone.

"It's Norm, Nate. You gotta get over here!"

"What is it? Is Adel okay?"

"She's gone bonkers this time, tried to hurt a customer. The police want to take her to jail."

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Nate hurtled down the stairs, then ran to Norm's diner. As soon as he turned the corner onto New Utrecht Street, he could see the flashing red lights of two squad cars parked in front of Norm's and a small crowd of on-lookers.

Nate entered the diner. Adel sat in one booth, staring across the table at a police sergeant, her face tear streaked, her eyes vacant. She hummed without a melody, and Nate could tell that she was extremely agitated. She literally sat on her hands. Norm, the owner of the diner where Adel had worked for two months, sat next to her.

"Adel, what's wrong? It's Dad."

Silence.

"She hasn't talked since ... since the incident."

"The incident?"

"Are you the father? I'm Sergeant Harrington, 66th precinct." Harrington was short, muscular, and evinced a no-nonsense attitude. His demeanor marked him as a man who demanded truthful answers.

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"Nate Miller, Sergeant." Nate sat down across from Norm. "What's going on?"

"We're not really sure. A fellow was eating here, looks like your daughter smacked him for no reason, they got into a screaming match, she threw a glass of water into his face, and then it was over."

"Norm, that didn't really happen, did it?"

"I was in the back, Nate. I heard the screaming, rushed out, and there's the two of them half-wrestling each other, and I pulled them apart. Adel was jabbering about a knife, but I didn't see anything. And my customer is soaked with water. So then he yells for the cops, he tells me that she just walked up to him and punched him in the head, and he's going outside to wait for the law. I told Tricia to call the police and I just took Adel over to the corner and told her to sit down. And by then she's crying, she's mumbling something about her mother, or talking about a mother-fucker, I don't know, but when I try to talk to her she won't say anything."

"Her mother! She never talks about her. Where's the guy, Sergeant?"

"One of the officers drove him down to Brooklyn Jewish to be checked out, since he said he had been hit." Harrington studied his notebook. "Name's ... Charles Broughton, 33."

Norm nodded. "Yeah, Charlie. He's a regular. I've seen him here before talking to Adel. Never a problem."

"Mr. Miller, Mr. Williams tells me that your daughter is impaired. It's a shame, but we have to arrest her. Broughton is filing an assault complaint."

"Sergeant, please. We don't know what really happened and there weren't any witnesses other than this guy. Adel is good-natured, although a bit off. Isn't there another way we can deal with this?"

"It's the law. You can come down to the precinct and get her out on a \$20 bond after she's booked. Then we'll let a judge sort it out. But, in the meantime, looks for sure she can't deal with customers here. If I was you, Mr. Williams, I'd send her packing. And, as for you, Mr. Miller, you gotta get her some help. When this gets to trial, the judge may decide to put her in Pilgrim State. You want to avoid that, I'm sure. C'mon, can you help me get her in the squad car?"

The mention of Pilgrim State Hospital chilled Nate to the core. Life had done a feature on the mental institution, replete with discussions of electroshock therapy and lobotomies. Patients died there daily. Nate recalled horrifying images of women with disheveled hair straining against restraints, as if imploring the photographer to rescue them from hell.

At the precinct, Nate stayed at her side. Adel still refused to talk, so Nate answered for her, providing the particulars that the police needed to fill out their forms. Adel became visibly upset only when the police photographer tried to capture her mug shot. She refused to hold the position that the photographer required, and started to slap herself in the head, making incoherent noises. The photographer gave up, assuring Nate that Adel's refusal conduct would hurt her chances for leniency from the judge.

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When Adel was released, Nate found the two of them out on the street, 15 blocks from their apartment, having no choice but to walk. After a few blocks, Adel finally began to talk.

"Dad, what just happened?"

"Adel, I was going to ask you."

"The cops were mean, weren't they? They pushed me around and asked all those stupid questions. And you know I don't like my photo taken because I'm ugly."

"They were just doing their jobs. Do you remember what happened at Norm's?"

"I'm a slut, right Dad?"

The word shocked Nate. He had never heard her use it. "Of course not! Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Isn't there some kind of a zoo for people like me?"

"You know you're not an animal."

"It's called .. an aviary. That's a zoo for birds. They can fly a bit but then they can't. We've seen them before." In fact, Nate recalled that he and Louise had taken Adel to the Prospect Park Zoo often when she was a small, but he could not remember whether the birds had made any particular impression on Adel at the time.

"Yes, that's just for birds."

Their conversation ended as quickly as it began. Like so many other conversations they had had since she had slipped into schizophrenia, questions and answers made sense, but only to a point, and then Nate would completely lose the thread of Adel's associations. Adel's mind just did not work in a linear fashion.

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As they trudged up their block, Nate saw in the darkness a large familiar form, a man he knew, but out of place. Norm had never visited them before, but had obviously been waiting at their doorstep, shivering, stamping his feet to get the blood flowing in his 60-year-old legs.

"Norm!" Adel was the first to greet him. "Dad has got me out of jail. It's good to have a lawyer for a dad."

Norm took Adel by her arms and pulled her close to him. "Are you okay? They didn't mistreat you, did they?"

"But I'm cuckoo. I hear lots of scary, nasty voices all the time now." Adel turned away from Norm, from the sound of her voice almost ready to cry again.

"Let's all go inside. C'mon Norm, you look like you're freezing. I can put on some tea."

As they entered the apartment, Adel walked into her room without taking off her coat. "I'm going to bed. Tell Norm goodnight for me." Nate and Norm glanced at each other, let Adel escape with no further attempt to talk to her, and then sat at the kitchen table.

"Nate, I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, but ..."

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"You don't have to say it. Adel can't work for you any more, and I don't blame you. You can't run a business with that kind of risk."

"The thing is .. I've become very fond of her. I mean, until tonight, she's been helpful, no one's complained ... Okay, she's odd, she's off the wall sometimes, but it's harmless. Yet, tonight ..." Norm stopped, lost in thought, and Nate used the break to start the tea. After the tea had been presented, and Norm took a long hot sip, he continued. "Nate, I had a daughter once. I know what you're going through, the same any parent goes through when their kid's in trouble. My Grace ...well, she would be about five years older than Adel."

"What happened?"

"That's the problem. I don't know. She could be dead by now, she could be a mother of three .. I have no idea because her Mom took her away and I let them go."

"That's a real shame. I'm sorry."

"And so, when I met Adel, she just somehow made me think of Grace. I just wanted to help her, and now it's all come to rot."

"You've been great, Norm. I don't know why Adel did whatever she did tonight, but it is has nothing to do with how well you've treated her. She seems happiest when she gets home from work. She gives me her pay every week with a proud look in her eyes, she functions in the real world, and it's been a blessing."

"Nate, get her the help she needs."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you need to get her to a real head doctor. You need to get fixed whatever it is inside of her that broke."

Nate waited for a few minutes before answering, draining his teacup. "We talked to so many doctors. And after Louise left, my wife, you know, I saw even more. Nothing made sense."

"Why did your wife leave, Nate? You don't mind me asking, I hope."

"It's ok. Louise left because Adel chased her with a knife. I came home one evening to find Louise locked in the bathroom and Adel on the sofa, babbling, the knife on the floor next to her. And Louise left the next morning, back to her mother Upstate, and that was the last she saw Adel."

"Shit. I'm sorry." Norm could think of nothing else to say. Nate began tidying up.

Understanding that their meeting was over, Norm got up to leave, thanked Nate for the tea, and then concluded his message. "Nate, when you get Adel fixed, when she's better, she will have a job waiting for her. Please." Norm closed the door behind him.

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"Yeah, I've heard of Thorazine. It seems like the cure is worse than the disease." Nate sat across from Dr. Paul Lack, a psychiatrist starting to establish his practice in Brooklyn. He was everything that popular culture suggested a psychiatrist should not be: he spoke with no detectable accent, was clean-shaven, and occupied an office that did not have a couch for his patients. He did not even wear a suit, but blue jeans, with cuffs

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rolled up a few inches, and a green turtleneck sweater. Nate felt that he had erred in setting up this appointment. Adel, having chatted alone with Lack for a half-hour, now sat in his waiting room, smoking.

“Mr. Miller, the press always exaggerate the risks of anything new. Yes, there are cases of severe side effects, but they are rare.”

“She could end up a zombie, she could develop uncontrollable shaking ...”

“Tremors is the technical term.”

“Tremors, whatever. Her skin could rot, she could ...”

“Mr. Miller, one of the main causes of death in untreated schizophrenia is suicide. Has Adel ever tried to hurt herself?” Lack already knew the answer.

“Yes, but ...”

“Has she punched herself in the head, scratched herself until she’s bloody, said things indicating low self-esteem?”

Nate couldn’t respond to the drumbeat of accusation. Lack had a way of making a loving father feel like a criminal, somehow bearing guilt for his daughter’s condition. Maybe he was guilty. He had been the one to suggest that Adel get a job. He had been reluctant to allow medications that other doctors had proposed over the years.

“Look ... the potential benefits of treating schizophrenia with Thorazine are enormous compared to the risks. Adel isn’t going to take medication unless she believes that you want her to take it, that’s clear. Are you going to deprive her of her chance to live a more normal life?”

He could not articulate his real fear, a vision of Adel bereft of the quirkiest that Nate deeply loved. He could not imagine an Adel who never tossed completely incomprehensible remark into the middle of a conversation, nor an Adel able to live independently from Nate’s supervision. For all his worrying about what would happen to Adel if he died, he now feared much more losing the Adel who would sit with him for hours next to the radio, who would clean the dishes from their meals without having to be prompted, who was so indifferent to her mother’s departure, who loved Jackie Robinson so much she believed they were to be married. He could not explain any of this to Lack, realizing he fears reflected an unacceptable selfishness.

“In that case, let me talk to her a second.”

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Norm Williams was tormented with doubt about his decision to fire Adel. On one hand, he saw that a restaurant could not survive if it had a reputation for employing staff that would smack its customers upside the head. On the other hand, he felt that he had been rash in his decision to cut his ties with her, subject only to a miracle cure of her illness that Norm did not believe could be achieved.

Norm had not been entirely honest with Nate about his own daughter. Although Norm’s wife had indeed left with Grace, never to be heard from again, what prompted her departure had been Norm’s insane jealousy, his accusations that his wife had slept with one of Norm’s friends, his refusal

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to consider that the “evidence” of such a relationship was entirely innocent and coincidental. Norm viewed himself as a man of action. Make a decision and stick to it. Shoot first and ask questions later. It had served him well enough in his life.

Now, he wondered if had likewise failed to give Adel the benefit of the doubt. He could not comprehend why Adel would have attacked Charlie out of the clear blue sky. They had seemed to chat pleasantly enough before, when Norm happened to glance at Charlie’s table while Adel cleared dirty dishes from a neighboring table. Odd, though. Adel was not one to chat pleasantly with strangers.

His diner was empty, about twenty minutes before its usual closing time. Nate began to shut down early. He grabbed \$60 from the till on his way out.

Adel started on Thorazine to no immediately noticeable improvement. Lack had told Nate that no drug works for everyone and that it might be weeks before they could tell if Thorazine would be helpful, but Nate worried nonetheless. Although he was determined to try the medication and coaxed Adel morning and night to take her pill, he felt almost as if Thorazine had made Adel’s schizophrenia worse.

Adel’s behavior changed. Often, she would sit at their living room window and stare outside, as if in a trance. That was abnormal. Or, tired of the window, she would pace the apartment, stumbling into the furniture, turning around to swing at imaginary foes. Nate wondered whether this was an example of the restlessness that Lack warned might be a side effect. Even more disturbing were the explicitly sexual references that crept into Adel’s mutterings. Nate heard Adel on a few occasions berating an unseen woman, using language that caused Nate’s face to turn bright red: “Thunder cunt go eat your own eggs!” or “Dick wad soak it up.” At least, that’s what Nate thought he heard. He would never ask Adel to repeat for the sake of clarity.

What hurt Nate most was Adel’s crying in the evenings when they had their supper together. The crying began almost imperceptibly as they finished eating and then mounted as Adel cleared the table and washed the dishes. The first time, Nate could not help himself and asked Adel why she was crying.

“I should be at Norm’s, now, Dad. I should be helping him. It’s my job, but he doesn’t want me any more.”

“Adel, you know Norm thinks the world of you. He wants you to get better first, to be able to help him in a big, big way.”

“The world is too big for me.” She reached into her apron and pulled out her prized possession, the baseball that Jackie Robinson had autographed for her. “This is the size of the world I need, something I can hold in one hand.” She replaced the ball, then grabbed a dish towel to start drying. “Norm hates me because I’m a cunt. That’s all I am.”

He should have said something comforting, should have dispelled the horrible self-appellation immediately, should have at least given her a sympathetic hug, but could not find it in himself to do anything of these

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things. Instead, he blinked back his own tears and put his kettle on the stove to make his evening tea.

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The idea to take Adel away sprang into Nate's head when he opened his February issue of National Geographic and found an article about the Great Smoky Mountains, a place he had always wanted to visit. When Nate broached the idea of a vacation, Adel's only concern was whether she'd be allowed to smoke on the bus. Nate assured her that she could and planned the trip. He would take a short leave of absence from his practice. He would get Adel away from the memories of having been fired by Norm. He would carry her Thorazine and make sure she took it twice daily. His partner, Ben, promised to get an extension of the date of Adel's court appearance to allow what Ben would describe as "medical leave." Dr. Lack wrote a supportive note.

Bedraggled, Nate and Adel finally checked into the Sleep Inn after disembarking from their Greyhound bus in Asheville. The proprietor snorted his disbelief when Nate told him that he and his daughter wanted a single room with two twin beds, but still gave them a key to Room 202. Adel had slept most of the way and remained completely silent when awake. She ignored Nate's few efforts to start a conversation.

The next morning, Nate got Adel up early and started to walk with her around the wooded neighborhood of the Sleep Inn. Nate found himself winded after just twenty minutes and heard Adel's heavy breathing as well, but he did not want to turn around. They walked another twenty minutes until the cold wind had thoroughly chilled them and then headed back. Their only conversation concerned the weather and the birds that they occasionally saw. Adel seemed interested in what kinds of birds they were, birds that Nate had thought were too early for spring in the Appalachians.

Nate bought a small guide book on birds and had Adel carry it on their walk the next day. Try as she might, it was difficult for her to connect up anything she saw in the sky with the colored pictures in the book. Yet, the effort preoccupied them, they forgot about the cold, and spent three hours away from the Sleep Inn by the time they returned for lunch. Then, Nate bought a small pair of binoculars at the Cherokee Trading Post, and the next day, armed both with bird book and binoculars, Adel managed to identify a few.

"Blue jay, Dad. Oops, isn't that a dove?" She fumbled with the book and the binoculars, dropped their backpack, picked it up again, and laughed.

And so it went. Their walks lengthened, they found new trails, they packed water and lunches of peanut butter sandwiches and apples, and still had no discussions about the problems that Adel had faced and would face when their vacation was over. And then Nate began to notice that Adel was not humming incessantly or mumbling incoherently and that their conversations lasted for minutes, not mere seconds, conversations that were focused and logical, albeit with respect to bird watching. He thought perhaps that Thorazine was having an effect.

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In the small dining room of the Sleep Inn, Nate and Adel watched each

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other over their menus, not really needing them to know what they wanted. Nate would have his grilled cheese sandwich and Adel would order spaghetti. The waitress poured water for each of them.

Adel smiled at Nate and picked up her glass. Nate could see that her hand shook, so much so that water splashed on the table in front of Adel. Adel didn't seem to notice the spill, took her sip, and with her unsteady hand clumsily placed the glass back on the table, spreading the puddle about. Nate pretended not to notice.

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With the help of Sergeant Harrington, Norm found the workplace of Charlie Broughton, a grimy factory in Long Island City that manufactured metal fasteners. Norm parked his Studebaker in a visitor's slot and presented himself to the receptionist as "a friend of Mr. Broughton's with an important message." The offer of a \$5 bill helped the recalcitrant receptionist see her way clear to paging Mr. Broughton, and shortly thereafter he appeared.

"Norm! You're the last person I expected to see."

"I figured as much, Charlie, but I got some serious business with you. Where can we talk?" Broughton motioned Norm over to a small anteroom and, when they had both entered, closed the door behind him.

"So, what gives?"

"Well, it's a shame you don't come over to the diner any more, Charlie. You were a good customer. You know, I sent Adel packing. She don't work there no more."

"That whore! You shoulda never hired her in the first place, Norm. Bad move on your part. It's what they call negligence."

"You see, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I'd like to settle any claims you have on me because of ... your injuries."

"Settle? Like in you pay me off and I don't bother you?"

"Exactly."

"Like how much?"

"Well, you didn't have doctor bills or anything, did you?"

"Oh, yeah, doctor bills. Hmm. That's probably \$50 right there. But, you know, I was humiliated in public. That cunt hit me on the head and then threw a glass of water into my face for nothing."

"Well, I should think that \$100 would be plenty of dough for all that. What do you say?"

"Nah, not enough by a long shot."

"Hmm. Well, I was hoping we could settle this. Let me think on it." Norm paused then, took out his wallet, rifled through it as if counting his cash. Broughton tried to steal a peak, but could not really see anything. "Charlie, one thing did seem a bit surprising to me about this whole deal..."

"What's that?"

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"Well, I seen you and Adel chatting together nicely, it seemed, once before. Odd, no? Out of nowhere she's hitting you."

"She's a fuckin' nut job, Norm, what didja expect? Plus, on top of that, she throws her fat tits in my face like she wants me to feel her up. How fuckin' disgusting is that?"

"Oh, shit, man. You're kiddin', right?"

"I mean, she's leaning over me because supposedly she's got to wipe off the table. Right in my fuckin' face."

"Ha ha. So did you grab a feel?"

"Damn right I did. Teach that cunt a lesson."

Nate lay awake, listening to Adel snore lightly, and figuring it was near 3 am. His legs and feet ached and his face still felt sore from the cold, biting wind of early March.

Their money was running out, they were running out of Thorazine, and he knew that, within a day or two, he and Adel would need to catch a return bus back to Brooklyn. There, they would have to face a criminal assault charge, regardless of whether Adel's illness had diminished because of the medication. They would have to start over again with Lack, so he could continue to prescribe Thorazine and monitor Adel's health, even though Adel's regular visits to a psychiatrist had begun to strain his budget. Once home, Nate would have to get back into the practice of law, a prospect that gave him no enthusiasm. He would miss very much his daily, albeit strenuous, outings with Adel, her enthusiasm for the birds – blue jays were clearly her favorite – and he worried that her recent energy and stamina would dwindle upon their return.

The string of worries kept Nate awake for an hour. Finally, he began to drift off again, only to be startled awake once more by a sharp cry from Adel.

"What is it, Adel?"

"Oh, Dad. A dream .. but not a dream." She sat up in bed and pulled the sheets up around her neck to hide her breasts, which otherwise would have been revealed by the greatly sagging nightgown that no longer fit snugly. She had lost weight over the five weeks, even though her voracious appetite had grown.

"A dream, but not a dream. Do you want to talk about it?"

"That night at Norm's. It's what started this whole trouble, but then without the trouble I wouldn't be here with you in this wonderful place. I dreamt that I was a bird. I could fly and look down on anything I chose."

"And ...?"

"Norm's. It's that night, Dad. I'm a bird and I'm watching that guy, Charlie whatever his name .. he touched me ... hehe squeezed my ... my ... breast ... and I told him to fuck off ... and then he called me a slut and a cunt and soand so. ..."

Adel paused, trying to figure out how best to relate what happened next.

"You slapped him upside the head?"

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“No. I didn’t slap him. What good was that going to do? I punched him as hard as I could. I wanted to kill him. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

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They sat around a conference table at the 66th precinct: Harrington, Ben, Norm, Nate, and Adel. Harrington had called them together on the afternoon before Adel’s scheduled court appearance.

“Thanks for all coming here at my rather late request. Well, there’s good news. Our D.A. has dropped the charges against Adel. No need to go to court tomorrow. Case has been dismissed.”

“Hot damn!” exclaimed Adel, the others happily concurring in that assessment.

“So, is there bad news?” asked Ben, ever vigilant on behalf of his client.

“No, other than we want Adel to stay on her medication if she can. Mr. Williams, there’s something that you want to say, isn’t there?”

“Yes, Sergeant. First, thank you for your help in getting the charges dismissed. I think that little chat you had with Broughton had a lot to do with it.”

“Wait. What the hell happened?” asked Nate.

“Let’s just say that Adel has a very good friend here in Mr. Williams. He found out that Broughton hadn’t told us the truth about that night. Mr. Miller, while you were out of town with Adel, Mr. Williams managed to get Broughton to compromise himself. Then I had a bit of a talk with him. Let’s say that I used some of the persuasive techniques that I have acquired over the years. Broughton admitted straight out grabbing Adel inappropriately. He wishes to have the matter end, forever.”

Nate looked over at Adel, who had lowered her glance, embarrassed by the whole affair. Nate noticed the unmistakable tremor in her hands as they rested in her lap.

“Was there more you wanted to say, Mr. Williams?”

“Yes. Adel, I’d like you to come back to work for me at the diner, starting tonight. You can have your job back and a \$.10 per hour raise. Will you come back?” Norm’s voice choked away to the point that his last words emerged only with a struggle. Nate thought he saw tears in Norm’s eyes.

Adel smiled and said nothing. She rose from her chair, went around the table to Norm, and hugged him. Norm got up and returned the hug, which lasted for many seconds, Norm and Adel oblivious to the others around them. Nate watched, happy and jealous.