

## Wilderness House Literary Review 5/4

*Robin Rozanski*

### **You Are My Beacon**

Alice parked in the steep driveway of her parents' house, the house she'd grown up in and not seen in years. The grade of the driveway was more severe than she remembered; she had to hold the door open to keep it from siding with gravity and slamming down on her shins as she got out of the car.

"We're here, sweetie," she said to her daughter as she unbuckled the car seat. Greta was quiet and nervous. She held a small threadbare lion to her face, both greasy from a lunch of French fries at the diner in Owatonna. The trip had gone smoothly for four days, but now stalled in front of the house with the wheelchair ramp. Her father and two hired neighbor boys had built the ramp twenty years ago. Alice had not been there when it was built; she'd been at the hospital in Duluth watching her mother comfort her sister, Dot, while nurses and doctors explained the need for one more surgery. Alice's father was a hard-working pessimist. By the time they brought Dot home eight days later, the ramp was built and he'd already taken a second job and sold his hunting rifles and deer stand.

Greta ran with newfound and extraordinary balance up the ramp to its first bend and then back down to the pile of luggage that Alice unloaded from the trunk of the rusty sedan. She ran the route again, stopping to bounce on the loose board half way up; she stooped to examine the cracks where new nails had been driven in. Gritty shingles were screwed onto every other plank to prevent slipping. The ramp was long and gradual with three sections nearly parallel to each other and separated by wide, flat landings. Alice dragged the bags. It was a different sensation to pull something heavy rather than push, but the same lean forward, the same dizzy sensation around each landing.

Greta was a girl of sunshine, Alice thought, not of ice and rain. A California baby straight out of academic wedlock. She'd brought glowing sunshine up here, too. Driven the dark clouds out and away to Lake Superior, banished at least for a day by this tiny explorer who had never needed snow boots. The front door opened and Greta stopped in her tracks just a few feet from her unknown grandmother.

"That's Nana Kay, sweetie," Alice said.

Kay stepped forward and picked up Greta, who accepted the embrace and kisses with silence and only a half-hearted, instinctual squirm.

"It hasn't been the same since you left," Kay said, sliding Greta to her hip and reaching a hand to Alice. Alice took the hand and squeezed it. A mother's hand can never stop being a mother's hand, she thought. Can never stop helping. Lifting. Trying.

"It's never been the same."

The house was arranged just as when she'd last seen it, but she still felt a shock looking at the wide spaces, the bare floor and the table for three, but with only two chairs. When Alice thought of her childhood home she still thought of how it'd been before, with the thick carpeting, the sturdy oak dining table and the sunken den with their father's hunting trophies and bookcases full of encyclopedias. Now the den was Dot's room, with a

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small aluminum ramp, and all the books and decoration removed. There was a cross on the wall that Alice had never seen before, and a picture of her sister with a man she didn't recognize.

"Where's Dot?" Alice asked.

"Dad took her to church." Kay stroked Greta's hair as the child slept on the loveseat that had replaced the full size couch.

"Dad went to church?" With the exception of Dot they were not religious, but even Dot had not usually gone to church.

"He drove her to meet Mark. I told you about Mark. Remember, the email."

Alice looked again at the picture. Mark. She'd known him when they were kids, she remembered now. He always had a snot nose and his shoes were never dirty. Now the story was that grown-up Mark had invited Dot to a bible study group. Eager for her to make friends, Kay and their father, Bill, took turns driving her twice a week to the church that doubled as a community center. The email had been over a year ago. Kay had forwarded an email to Alice that Dot had forwarded to her. Dot's comment was *He has found the words I have searched for all these years. This is a blessing.*

Mark's words to Dot were about the shooting. Her shooting, and her questions: Why me? Why the girl's camp? *The weakness of women is something we sometimes forget. God sees this seeks to remind us of our weakness (it affects all of us). Jamie tried to interfere, and God had no choice. You are a reminder to us all. You are beautiful like a beacon from Jesus. Jamie's death was not your fault, but the fault of a weakness beyond your control. You were too young then, we were all too young, but with age we can now see and we can change. You are beautiful. You are my light from heaven.*

"I remember," Alice said. "I think I'll go upstairs for a minute."

The upstairs was almost unchanged. Alice's bedroom had a new bedspread and was sometimes used as a guest room. Dot's room had not been touched; it was as if she had been taken from the world that day, not just moved downstairs. They had never rearranged things, so she had two rooms: one for who she used to be and one for who she'd become.

Alice went into Dot's room. When they were kids it wasn't as simple as just walking into silence. When they were kids it was dynamic, changing, filled with music. Dot had tired of being called Dorothy and had assigned herself "Dot" the summer before ninth grade.

"Not Dot like polka dot," she'd explained to younger Alice, "but Dot like speck. Like nothing, like totally philosophical. Like when Eddie Vedder says you'll be a star in someone else's sky. Think about the whole galaxy."

Alice tried to think of it, but she didn't get it. She hadn't understood the way Dot combined grunge with goth. It was ugly. Alice, nervous about seventh grade, looked at her copy of the brightly illustrated *Alice in Wonderland* and felt happy that her hair was blonde and shiny like her namesake. She couldn't figure out why Dot ripped her jeans, let her hair grow unbrushed and wild like prairie grass, and wore frayed flannel shirts. She'd bought a pair of men's tan work boots at a garage sale and painted

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them purple, then black, then purple-black. She had chosen a side: she was with the music, with her friends, with the times.

She was pissed off, the clothes said, even if she still smiled the way she always had. She was against Saddam, and against wealth and manners. In the method of teenagers she was against the world, unprovoked. She waited for clouds, and Alice waited with her. That was when Dot, in her goth mood, fell in love with priests and the idea of religion as melodrama. Alice had thought about it so much since the shooting that she had moved to California to work on a PhD in cultural studies.

Alice sat on the twin bed in Dot's room and looked at the dusty, faded posters. Pearl Jam, Smashing Pumpkins and Madonna. Alice remembered watching those posters go up. Kay had come home from the grocery store and held out a candy bar for each girl. Alice had hugged Kay like it was Christmas morning, but Dot had refused her treat and had run up to her room. Even when Dot mumbled something rudely incoherent their mother did not seem shocked. Alice thought she might be psychic; she always looked as if she expected each of Dot's strange turns. She didn't even get mad when Dot started wearing thick black eyeliner that transformed her sweet hazel eyes to a dangerous green.

Alice took both candy bars and ran up after Dot, trying to take the steps two at a time, but tripped. Alice pushed at Dot's door but it resisted, stopped quick against an oversized stuffed bear.

"That's my bear!" Alice whined.

"I gave it to you, it's mine."

"But you gave it to me, that's my bear!" Alice pushed with both hands, squishing the corner of the door mercilessly into the back of the poor bear.

"You're the one barging into my room," Dot yelled over the heavy guitar-and-feedback music, "barging like a wild boar, so it seems appropriate to use your bear as a doorstop." She picked up the bear and tossed it aside to let Alice in.

"BUT," Alice punched the air with the candy bar like a judge's gavel, "you had to go into *my* room to get *that* bear, which, by your *own admission* is now *my* bear."

Dot shut the door and grabbed her candy bar, devouring it in three bites and discarding the wrapper into her laundry pile. She jumped up onto her bed and, towering there, pointed to the wall. "What do you think?" She changed her room almost every week, rearranging posters, taking down pictures of friends who were now enemies, reinstating those she'd forgiven. She still had a few of her smaller teddy bears, but now they were accessorized with earrings punched through their half-moon ears, one wearing an ankh necklace, the next in a bowtie and lace skirt, and the last one, the oldest, tenderly held together with careful stitches and bandages. She wanted to be a veterinarian.

"This is the newest." Dot pointed to a poster for a movie that hadn't even come out yet. An action movie starring a French hunk as a gun-toting priest who saves a beautiful girl from a demon that wants to end the world. "So hot. So very hot."

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Alice couldn't remember the name of the movie. She'd torn the poster down herself when Dot refused to attend her high school graduation.

Late in the afternoon, Alice went back downstairs to watch Greta and Kay make Jello. The wet dust stained Greta's fingers and she touched red spots to Kay's cheeks and they laughed. She'd awakened from her nap with an easy smile and attached herself to Kay as if they had never been strangers. Kay called it Grandma Magic.

Outside, Bill's truck pulled up. He went to the back and lifted out the wheelchair— a heavy task made light by frequency—unfolded it, double checked it, swung out one footrest and pushed it to the passenger side. Graceful and careful he lifted Dot from the cab. She stood for a moment on her remaining leg and held his shoulder as he closed the door. He helped her down and hooked her catheter bag on the back of the chair. He pushed her up the ramp to the door, and then they were all there, face to face, the whole family. Greta, frightened by the black wheelchair, hid behind Kay. Alice hugged her father and then went to Dot. She was thin, her face like a child's, smooth and pale, but she wore a blue dress that looked like a hospital gown. Alice took her hands. She wanted to lean down to hug her, but the smell of urine from the bag was strong and startling. Alice had forgotten.

"It's good to see you," Dot said. Her smile was unchanged, but her voice sounded weak and thready. "I was so happy when I heard you agreed to come stay with me."

"I can't remember the last time we had a vacation to ourselves," Bill said. He leaned down to take a look at Greta, playing peek-a-boo from behind Kay's legs.

"I'm a burden," Dot said. "Don't I know it."

Alice shook her head to protest, but words lumped up in her throat so she just squeezed Dot's hands. She felt much too tall.

"She must get those dark eyes from the father," Dot said.

"Yep," Alice said. Greta's father had been a student in the department with Alice, where Humanities studies were thrown together in tightly packed, poorly ventilated offices. He had charcoal eyes that cried when she told him she was pregnant and again when he told her he could not stay to be a father. Creating a life is a miracle, he'd said, thanking Alice like she'd picked up Greta at a gift store, like a novelty souvenir that he'd enjoyed for a few days and then left behind.

After that Alice stayed to work on her courses, but she'd abandoned her dissertation and never completed the degree. She'd tried to define the figure of priests as the ultimate in seduction. They seemed to hold a special place in the collective fantasies of young girls, right next to vampires. Vampires, with their metaphoric penetrating bite were sexually aggressive, relieving the girl of responsibility in the sexualized act. Priests, on the other hand, were passive. They resisted seduction, giving a girl a playing field to test her sexual boundaries without fear. He also had an impressive command of the supernatural, and a flattering dark uniform. It had been an interesting topic, but left her advisors wanting more and also failed to answer Alice's own questions.

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That year of unpredictable rebellion, Dot begged to go to a church camp for summer vacation. Kay, who taught at the elementary school and knew the camp director, pulled some strings and got her in at the last minute. Alice asked to go, too, but there were no more beds in the camps for her age group. Dot packed up her tapes, her make up, and her desires and got on a bus headed for Knife Lake.

Three days later the phone rang at 4:15 in the afternoon. Alice was home from school and had made herself a peanut butter sandwich. Her mom would pick up her dad at the car dealership on her way home from school and they'd be home in an hour.

"Mrs. Andersson?"

"Yes, go ahead," Alice said. She'd been practicing her grown-up voice and had been told she sounded like her mother.

"I'm afraid there's been an incident at the camp. Your daughter was taken to Northern Mercy hospital, and we need you to get here as soon as possible."

Without asking questions Alice dutifully wrote down the phone number, directions and all the instructions. Twisted ankle she thought, poison ivy. She bounced on her tiptoes and took a bite of her sandwich, pleased to imagine Dot's stupid camp trip ruined, and exited that her sister would be forced to come home and spend the rest of the summer with her. She didn't give the message to her mother until after dessert.

Calvin Reigert, 26, former counselor and pastor at Camp Covenant, had been charged with misconduct. Although acquitted of the charges he'd lost his job, undergone severe scrutiny in the media, and was unable to find work. He entered the campgrounds at night, after the ghost stories and s'mores, with a loaded handgun. He opened fire on the first people he saw, killing one and injuring four before shooting himself in the head. Coworkers later said they should have seen it coming.

He'd fired on a group of girls, including Dot, sneaking away to smoke cigarettes with Jamie, a handsome sixteen-year-old. After the first three girls took bullets in the shoulder, arm and foot, Jamie jumped on Dot to shield her and try to get them to the ground. He was shot three times, two of the bullets passing through him and hitting Dot. One severed the femoral artery in her right leg, the other tore through her abdomen and lodged in her bladder. Dot's nightmares usually featured Jamie, bloody and strong, cutting off her other leg with a knife made of bullets.

Over the course of dinner Dot became the center of Greta's curiosity. The little girl refused to stay seated and instead walked from person to person, staring up at Kay with wide eyes, forgetful of the handful of green beans she carried with her.

"Where to next?" Bill asked Alice.

"Chicago, I think." Alice evaded questions about her future, but here at the dinner table she was trapped just as she been when she was a child, subject to the will of her parents until they excused her.

"Greta, sit down."

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The girl chewed on the beans and shuffled behind Kay's chair, away from Alice's glaring looks. She stepped toward Dot, staring at her boldly, secured by invisibility of being a child during a grown up conversation. She leaned over and examined the bottom of the wheelchair, dropping what remained of her green beans.

"Are you going to be a professor?" Kay asked.

Alice cut up the slice of ham on her plate and held out the pieces to Greta's emptied hands as she walked past. "Now sit, leave Aunt Dot alone," she said. "Dot, have you ever been to Chicago?"

"Alice," Kay said sternly. What she said with that one word was: you know Dot hasn't ever made it further than Duluth. The silence wrapped around the table. Greta returned to her chair and slurped her milk. Alice tried to set her focus on the basket of rolls and the single candle centerpiece that her mother always took out for company, but she still saw Dot in her periphery. Pale Dot. Speck. Nothing. A black metal frame, an unneeded footrest. Empty space. Why didn't Dad remove it? Just needs a screwdriver. Five minutes.

Bill filled his plate with a second helping of everything and left the table without saying a word. "Sometimes he likes to finish his dinner on the porch, when it's nice out like tonight," Kay said, pushing her unfinished plate away. "We are always so happy to get your letters. And the pictures. Especially your pictures," she said to Greta.

Dot sat up from her slouch, smiling, practically raising her hand like Dot the above average student, before she dropped out of her junior year for the home schooling that didn't work out. "Mom, if I can be excused, that reminds me of my present."

"Of course, that's nice."

Dot unlocked her wheels and slowly backed away from the table. She pursed her lips and looked as concentrated as a beginner.

"Need help?" Kay asked. Dot shook her head and went to her room. She had a tiny summer outfit for Greta. She'd sewn it herself. Short overalls with a happy puppy embroidered on the front and a hat with a bright sunshine appliqué. Greta ran to examine the outfit, standing as close to Dot as she could, right in the space where a leg should have been.

"One of your favorite things," pointing to the sun, "and one of my favorite things," Dot pointed to the puppy.

"You made those?" Alice asked.

"I have to do something to keep my hands busy," Dot said. "I drop off some fancy blankets at the maternity ward when I have to see Dr. Lane at the hospital, or mom delivers things for me when she goes out."

Is this what her sister had grown up to be? A shut-in who sends out crafts to the families of others? Alice couldn't even remember who Dot was supposed to be, what she had wanted. But it doesn't matter anymore, she thought, she's now spent more of her life as this person than as her real self. Dot asked Greta if she wanted to watch a show on Animal Planet; Greta pumped up to her tiptoes and pushed the chair. Alice sat at the table across from her mother, waiting to be excused.

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“Come on Dot, I’m taking you to see Dr. Lane today.”

“What?” Dot yelled from behind the closed bathroom door. “That’s not until next week.”

“It got rescheduled. We have to leave in ten minutes.”

Dot brushed her hair and put a green sweater on over her plain dress. Alice walked her down the ramp to the car. When she opened the door Greta jumped in and crawled between the seats to the back and buckled herself into her car seat.

“How do I do this?” Alice asked Dot.

“Line the chair up to the car like this,” she gestured with her hands, “lock the wheels and then—where are you going?”

“I’m opening the trunk. Your wheels are locked, go ahead.”

“Dad always helps me up.” Dot turned from side to side, trying to get a look at Alice to see if she was serious.

“For twenty years? You have two normal arms and a normal leg? For twenty years?”

Dot wiped her sweaty hands on the crocheted blanket on her lap. “The truck is too high up.” Her face was red.

“This isn’t the truck. That seat is the same height as your chair.” Alice took the blanket off Dot’s lap and tossed it in the back seat. Greta snagged it and hung it over her face and started a song about being a ghost.

“What about the bag?”

“Fine, I’ll help with your piss bag.”

“No swearing!” Greta interrupted and then continued singing.

Dot kicked her footrest to the side, double checked the wheel locks and slowly pushed herself up. Her hands shook from her own weight as she moved her hands one at a time from the chair to the car, turned once on her heel, and dropped onto her hip into the car. Alice set the bag gently onto the floor then folded up the chair. The car shook when she slammed the trunk.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it,” she said, starting the engine.

“It’s been fifteen years,” Dot whispered, looking out the window. “Not twenty.”

“Seems longer.”

In the silence of their drive Greta fell asleep. The thin highway carved a tunnel through the tall trees around them. The forest was in summer bloom. Alice flicked her turn signal and took an exit. Dot lurched forward and grabbed the dashboard. Her fingers cut through the dust. Her hands were as smooth and soft as ever. In some ways she seemed younger than Alice, smaller.

“This isn’t the way to the hospital. Where are we going?”

Her frightened yell awakened Greta who instantly echoed Dot’s question.

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"What? Relax. It's a surprise. There's a petting zoo here, and I remembered that you like animals, and Greta likes animals, so..."

Greta yelled with excitement, a high-pitched scream of joy. She began to yell out all the names of animals she knew, bucking her tiny body against the buckles and straps of her car seat.

"No," Dot said firmly. "No. I won't go."

"Lambs! Elephants! Cats! Fishes! Bears! Chickens!"

The car filled with the cacophony of tiny adrenaline-powered shouts. Alice pulled into the dirt lot next to two other cars in front a sign that said *Kaghler Family Farm. Visit the Animals. Pony Rides. M-W, Noon-4PM. \$5/Person.*

Greta tugged at her buckles, hollering to be set free. Alice laid down the law that they either all went or no one went. She turned off the car certain that Dot wouldn't deny Greta, bright little Greta, her chance to ride a pony. The mood in the car grew tense, and, with the air turned off, stale and hot. Dot shook her head and looked away from Alice.

"Are you having a panic attack or something?"

Dot covered her face with her hands and made a quiet whining noise in her throat. After a few minutes a family with two boys with dirt-covered hands and knees returned to the mini-van parked next to them. The oldest boy, bigger than Greta, stared in at Alice.

"All right, bad idea, let's just go," Alice said, starting the car and speeding away from the farm before the other family had even unlocked their doors.

Kay and Bill decided to take Greta with them on their trip. Terrified of Dot after the incident at the farm, Greta was now excited to meet a Great Aunt and all the cousins. She waved her lion around and let his roar do the talking for her. Alice watched the tiny lion waving to her from the backseat of the truck and felt her muscles trying to chase them down the street. Her daughter had never been moved away from her like this.

She transferred her caregiving from Greta to Dot. Quickly the routine came back to her. Very little had changed since the last time Alice had lived at home and helped take care of Dot, only now she was alone. But Dot did not seem to weigh much more than a child. She wanted help getting in and out of the tub, in and out of the car, and she preferred to be pushed rather than have to wheel herself, but in the house she was quiet and had her own business to attend to. She studied her bible and talked to Mark on the phone. When she was hungry she either ate from a stash of unsalted potato chips she kept in her room or patiently waited for Alice to bring her a meal. For the first day alone they hardly spoke.

"Got a job yet?"

"No. You working?"

"No. What about Chicago?"

"What about it?"

Alice walked through the lower level, spreading out to cover the wide lanes carved for the chair from the kitchen to the living room.



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"Mark is coming over," Dot announced halfway through the week.

"What's his deal, anyway?" Alice asked. "He sounds like an insane person. Weakness of women and all that shit, next he'll be trying to cure you of hysterics or stop white slavery or something."

"He's not a racist, he's a Christian. He's coming to get me tomorrow afternoon and he'll take me to see Dr. Lane so you can't torture me again."

"An unchaperoned date, huh? Don't go dancing, isn't that how the devil gets you?"

"Don't be an idiot, Al, were not southern Baptists. He's helped me accept my life. He accepts my limitations." She gathered the crocheted blanket up into her hands and clutched it the same way Greta clutched her lion. "We're getting married. I'm going to ask Mom and Dad to let him move in with us here as soon as you leave."

Alice tried to unhear what Dot had just said, to think of any other words than those, to hear her talk again about rock music or freedom of speech or how *Reservoir Dogs* was the best movie ever made. What had stopped Dot from being Dot? How had she turned into this other person, this person who let all her energy be cut away with her leg?

"Hold on," Alice said. She grabbed the chair and pulled it down the hall to the stairs.

"What are you doing?" Dot said, holding tightly to the arms of the chair and bracing her heel in the footrest.

"I'm dragging your dead weight up these fucking stairs."

They traveled upwards one heavy thud at a time. The stairs were too shallow to ever take on any of the weight, so Alice had to lean back with all her strength to keep both of them from tumbling down. At the top of the stairs they paused, both panting. Alice expected Dot to grab the wheels and propel herself somewhere, but she had nowhere to go.

"Don't you ever think about this?" Alice asked, pointing at Dot's dusty old room.

"This is kid stuff. I never asked them to leave it like this. They did that for themselves."

"For you, for you to come back to."

"How can I come back to this?"

"No, back then, I mean, back to your old self."

"There is no 'old self', no one has an old self, we just are who we are. Don't blame me for your messed up life. It's obvious you don't know what to do with yourself, but it's *okay*."

Alice grabbed the chair and tipped it. Dot fell forward to her hands. Her skirt flew up and revealed the pale stump below her hip. Alice carelessly dropped the catheter bag to the floor and took the chair away before Dot, who was distracted straightening her skirt, realized what was happening. The empty chair crashed down the stairs and landed on its side on the hard floor at the bottom. Alice ran down after it. She sat on the bottom step staring at the chair. It was black, cheap but functional.

Before she'd left for college Alice had started a fund at the bank and

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held a fundraiser to get Dot to a doctor out of state that specialized in complex prosthetics. She'd gone door to door with flyers that told the story of the girl who'd been shot, the mother who had to leave her classroom, the father who worked two jobs and the sister who was leaving them now. Dot refused to go. We can at least get you a better wheelchair, Alice said, one with a motor, or one you can race marathons in. Dot said she wasn't a beggar. The money was still in the bank with Dot's name on it. Almost a thousand dollars that she had refused to acknowledge.

Alice left the empty chair overturned where it was and ignored Dot's cries from upstairs. She grabbed her car keys and went out the front door. She looked at the car and decided to walk. She wanted time, not distance. How long between now and the apologies and fixing? At least twenty minutes, no more than an hour. Then there would be silence from Dot and silence from Alice. When their parents returned and Dot announced her engagement, Alice would try to smile. Then she would take Greta away, past Chicago, maybe all the way to the east coast. But first she needed this moment. Time to feel like a monster and really deserve it, to revel in a guilt she had knowingly earned, not the creeping remorse cobbled together from different parts of shame that had lived within her since that phone call at 4:15 in the afternoon.