

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/2

Nels Hanson

The Boy in Sleeping Child Lake

NOW HER STOMACH WAS SMOOTH AND BEAUTIFUL AGAIN, there wasn't the scar her husband made when he said that the boy wasn't his—

In the dream by the green river I thought I woke.

"Found him. A-okay."

"*Would you copy? Over.*"

There were amplified voices, the gabble of people talking over a radio.

"Subject intact. Over."

"Roger. Out."

I heard steps down the hall as I leaned back to Emma in the white-flowering clover buzzing with sting-less bees, beside the moving water.

Later she was lost in the tall humming grass, I couldn't find her.

I opened my eyes and the bed was empty. Pale light shown at the glass doors.

"Emma?"

Her clothes and black purse were gone from the suede chair. Her tall boots. No answer came from the bathroom.

I got up and on the coffee table I saw the room key, my wallet.

The white Sleeping Child of carved antler.

The boy in Idaho had made me take it when I gave him five dollars.

"It's good luck, Captain—"

I looked in the bathroom.

Thank you, Bill. One day he'll wake up!

It was written in soap across the wide mirror, under the sleeping baby in the basket like a boat on the curving river.

I crossed the room to the balcony and Emma's Chevy truck was still parked by the dock. I pulled on my clothes and boots and went out the door past the painting of the Indian in the snow.

The elevator wouldn't come up. I saw the stairs and started down the three flights.

I didn't see her in the big room with the animals and leaping fire and the spotlighted hero, just a man with hands behind his back staring up at the 10-foot Custer.

In the alcove off the dining room an older woman sat alone on the couch by the vacant chair. Last night Emma talked with the woman who held the red-haired baby while I went to get the key.

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I started into the main room.

"I'm sorry. You'll have to wait."

I ignored the girl at the register. All the lights hanging from the high rafters blazed. The dining room was packed for Sunday brunch. Waitresses and dressed-up wealthy tourists and black-suited people from church—

In a blur I scanned 30 buzzing tables, the face of every dark-haired woman, each time expecting Emma to wave her hand. She'd gone down to get a table, before we told the police her ex-husband had taken her son.

"You've got to go."

"I know," she said. "In the morning."

I saw five blue sweaters but no face was hers. Couples sat on the raised hearth, holding cocktails that sprouted red paper umbrellas.

The dark bar with the buffalo was empty, except for the tall bartender making drinks in front of the mirror and the banks of bottles.

Above his head the black-horned bull stared with brown eyes.

"The Ghost Dancers thought the buffalo and the dead were coming back," the bartender said in the Ingot bar. I showed him the antler as Emma watched. "The Sleeping Child's the same thing."

"You got those ready?"

A blonde waitress stepped in with a tray.

"Almost," the bartender said without looking up.

Out the narrow window I saw Emma's truck. She was outside somewhere.

"They found him, huh?" the bartender said.

I stopped as the waitress set her empty tray on the counter.

"Across town."

With two hands she smoothed her long hair.

"She took the boy while they were asleep?"

"They got up for church and the front door was wide open. When they tried to call the nanny they couldn't get her."

"Who took him?"

The waitress straightened a bang.

"It wasn't the Indian."

"I heard that."

"The nanny was hooked up with a guy. She got her sister to get the kid."

She touched the corner of her mouth and frowned.

"She was straight from rehab."

"Where'd they find him?"

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"At the trailer park. I guess they were doing meth."

She lifted the tray of drinks and stepped quickly toward the door.

"I'll be right back."

"Don't hurry."

"Tell Mr. Hamphill—"

"You tell him."

I looked back out the window.

The police thought Emma had taken somebody's boy and come to our room to get it back, before the radio call.

The missing child was found but it wasn't Emma's.

Under the snow clouds the water looked even greener than the day before. I thought pale flakes twirled down across the window but it was just the white light.

Past the dock I saw the dark buoy without its beacon that had crossed our room with blue light. I woke on the sofa, from the bad dream of the monster in the lake, and Emma asked me to the bed.

"It's like yours," she said, lifting the white pendant between her breasts. "The Sleeping Child."

It was farther out than I thought.

But it wasn't a buoy. I turned to the bartender.

"Did a woman come in here?"

"A lot of women come in here."

"An Indian woman, young?"

He pushed the celery stalks with his knife.

"Indians don't come in here much."

"Did she?"

He was mixing a row of bloody marys, dropping in the celery and then green olives stuck with umbrellas.

"She good looking?"

"Long black hair? Blue coat?"

"You must be Ryder. Mr. Hamphill's looking for you."

"What'd she say?"

"She said she found him."

"Found who?"

He squeezed a lime.

"She said she found him and not to worry. It's getting to be a regular lost and found around here."

"When did she tell you?"

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"Twenty minutes."

I went back through the glass-walled room and the tables, toward the side entrance we'd come in last night from the lake. I dodged a rolling cart and nearly knocked over a girl with a tray of coffee and orange juice.

"Careful—"

She tried to balance the rocking platter as I passed her shoulder and reached out to shove the heavy door. It didn't give and my head hit the glass. I kept jerking the chrome bar but the thing was locked with a key.

"You can't go that way," someone said.

I crossed the room and alcove and into the hall of dead animals and Custer to the lobby.

"Mr. Hamphill wants to see you. You're to wait!"

The kid from last night called from the desk, raising his hand. I went by the blurred photo of the monster on the easel and out the double doors, walking fast and then starting to run.

I ran through the lot of cars, past three men with rifles who stared into the silver pickup's bed, down the hill to the dock and the light pole with the sign.

Visit the Lost City and See the Monster!

The passenger door to the tan truck hung open.

"Emma?"

I walked up and saw the pop cans and candy wrappers on the floorboard.

"My brother's kids get it dirty. That's my niece's doll—"

I turned and a few yards away Emma's black leather purse lay in the gravel. I didn't stop but ran to the pier and down the planks of the floating dock. I jumped in the first boat, undoing the line. I stepped back and yanked the pull rope to the engine.

"Hey!"

The boatman came out of his house.

"What're you doing!"

"You rent a boat to the woman I was with yesterday?"

"You don't go in the boats till you pay. That's the rule—"

"Did you!"

"So what?"

"Call an ambulance!"

"What for?"

He stood there with a blank face.

"You the intern?"

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"Do it!" I yelled.

"They found him all right."

"Found who!"

He looked confused.

"She didn't take Hamphill's baby."

"Go call!"

I gunned the boat wide open. From 50 yards I looked back and though the boathouse window I could see him with the phone to his ear.

I headed for the dot of boat and had to watch it get larger in sudden slow jumps across the green water. The wind blew straight in my face and I heard the engine sputter. I ran the motor all out but it kept missing.

We'd taken a blue boat the day before and the motor was good.

"I want to go out on the lake, to look at the city. Please. I need to calm down—"

I heard a siren and a police car with flashing blue lights raced down the gravel hill toward the dock. I headed straight for Emma's dark boat until I saw it turn yellow.

"*Emma!*" I shouted from 100 yards.

Emma stood, her black hair blowing. She wore an orange life jacket and raised an arm to wave, then sat down behind the red engine cover.

At 40 yards I saw the boat was drifting, the big motor off. I heard her try to re-start the engine, the spark's pop and the intake of air. Now I felt foolish for calling the police.

But she told the bartender she'd found her son—

"Emma?" I brought up the boat. "You all right?"

The blue sweater and her leather skirt lay next to the life jacket. The two gunwales hit and I stood up, searching the water and started to dive, then leaned back. I yanked my boots and shirt and stared through the viewer—the rock city was gone and I fumbled to find the switch.

A vacant bridge leapt up in the spotlight through the clear water. Something flashed at the top of a round tower—I dove and my lungs seized at the shock as I pulled down the lit water and she was closer but still far away. Emma sat on a ledge, arms crossed at her breasts, the silver bracelet shining—

I started to shout, "Don't do this!"

Her long hair parted as she lifted her face and her black eyes were open—I saw the beauty mark at the corner of her lip. I reached for her arm but caught only water and kicked harder as she tilted her head. The white Sleeping Child swung up at Emma's neck and her arms came open, something shooting past me.

Emma began slipping sideways with black hair flowing across her eyes. I caught her wrist as she fell, beating with my free arm and kicking

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and we went straight down.

I kicked and beat my arm twice more and then I was losing my grip as her wrist slipped past my fingers. The circle of silver flared and again I followed it down the tower's smooth wall.

I lifted my palms to push against the coming water, watching her legs go down the dimming light. I watched for her to stop and turn and I couldn't follow anymore.

I pulled at the cold water, stroking hard to climb the spotlight's bright shaft with the Levis pulling me down. My mouth started to open and I clenched my teeth.

I broke the water and gulped air. I caught the gunwale and hung on, nearly tipped it and climbed in. The floor rocked and I reached for the seat and put my head against the viewer. It was dark and I hit the switch.

I saw Emma slowly darken as she angled down toward a green shadow the spotlight could never reach. She joined the green water and the bracelet glinted and went out.

An air horn screamed. Far away two men were waving at the dock.

I stood up and started to fall backward and grabbed the metal visor and sat down. I looked at Emma's leather skirt. The plaid of her wool jacket. I saw my shirt. I'd thrown it in the air from the blue boat and it landed by Emma's sweater.

I heard a whooshing beat and a sharp cry.

"Emma?"

A V of mallards skimmed the lake 30 yards away, blue slashes on their wing-tops and the drake's domed emerald head out front as he led them low across the water. Now they veered and angled up in a wedge into the white sky and disappeared and I heard them call like ghosts.

Something splashed ahead and broke the surface. It went under again.

I got back to the motor and pulled at the rope. It came half way and snagged. I pulled again hard and turned the throttle as the engine caught.

I steered the boat full speed 20 yards and jumped off the gas.

I let the boat glide forward, leaning across the gunwale to catch her arm and lift her in. I'd give her CPR and get her breathing.

Then I saw it wasn't Emma.

After all, she'd found him, only to lose him again.

The small form bobbed on his side with his arm breaking the green water and falling back. I saw the small face below the surface, the other shadowed arm and little palm and didn't understand.

Thank you, Bill. One day he'll wake up!

Emma took it from the truck, held it tightly in her arms before she fell and let it go.

I watched the curled lips and nose, the closed lids.

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“Ryder!”

I looked up for a second, at a green boat with two cops and in front a man in a

gray suit coming toward me.

He was so light as I lifted the doll from the cold water and set him down softly like Emma’s lost boy, like the Sleeping Child, on Emma’s blue sweater.