

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/1

Ty Russell

The Intersection

There's only one stoplight in Sullivan County, by the general store at the intersection of routes 87 and 220 in Dushore. It's just a few miles past the bridge over the Loyalsock where kids used to dive when the water ran higher, but it's shallowed now. When it doesn't rain for a stretch of two weeks you can see the rocks beneath the surface.

After eight o' clock the light shuts off. It just blinks. Most times there aren't any cars all day, much less night. The square stays empty. Yellow, then black. The light's one of the old ones, the mechanical kind instead of electric. It runs on a timer. If you park underneath it you can hear it click.

The light's more a formality than anything else. There's not much traffic in Dushore. And in the past 35 years there's only been one accident at that intersection.

But that was a bad accident.

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Sheriff Wilson got up before his alarm went off, a faint outline of December light in the trees. Outside the window, he could see the bare winter fields lying in cold silhouette against the mountains and the leafless trees with not a breath of wind to disturb them. Shivering, he got out of bed and dressed, cautious not to wake his wife and went into the kitchen to put on coffee, pulling an afghan over his shoulders.

He stood for a few minutes, rising into wakefulness, over the sink looking out the window at the sunrise. He gulped the coffee down black and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. He looked at his watch. As he was toasting a slice of bread the phone rang and he snatched it up before the second ring.

"Sheriff Wilson," he said. He listened. "No, I'm up. Can't speak for Jeanette though, she doesn't have her staff meeting at the school until eight." He pulled the coiled cord behind him and ducked into the refrigerator, pulling out a dish of butter. "Is that right? Well, we don't have much of a computer system anyways. Double zeroes look the same for a filing cabinet." He laughed into the phone. "That's right. Okay, bye."

He closed the refrigerator door and sighed. He squinted out the window over the cornfields and watched the line of morning light rise up the backside of a burnt red barn. There was no wind. The iron barn rooster didn't move. He took his glasses off and massaged the bridge of his nose. Jeanette walked in, yawning and rubbing her arms for warmth. "Mornin Ed Tom," she said.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Did I wake you?"

"That's all right," she said, kissing his cheek. "What did they need?"

"Company wanted to know if the department had updated and backed up our computer system properly for the new year."

"What'd you tell them?"

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"I said Stacey-Lee can tell 2000 from 1900. We'll be alright thanks."
She smiled. "Big deal over nothing, I think."

Ed Tom nodded. He was standing over the sink, holding onto the counter and gazing out the window. Jeanette watched him.

"You know, he'd be twenty this week," she said.

He winced. "I know," he said quietly, not looking at her.

"I saw Frank Lapey at the store the other day, after..."

Ed Tom snorted and took his hat, striding across the room.

"Ed Tom..." she said.

He turned on her, his face contorted. "Jeanette I don't want to hear about that man. Never."

"He's your neighbor."

"If I ever do see him I've got a half a mind to kill him."

"Ed Tom you don't want all that hate living in your soul, you don't. Frank is not a bad man. He made a mistake. There's not a one of us alive who hasn't."

He grunted. "I've got to be gettin to the department," he said, and went for the door.

When he got to the station twenty minutes later his secretary, Stacey-Lee, was waiting for him.

"Had a host of calls for you already this morning, Sheriff," she said.

"Well I'll be in my office until noon, I can take anything until then."

"Yes sir."

"Where's Marcus?"

"He took the day off. His wife's pregnant. They're celebrating."

"Oh, good for him."

"Yes."

Five minutes later she called in.

"Mr. Whitmore on line one for you, Sheriff."

He nodded and reached for the handset. "Mr. Whitmore? How are the grandkids? That's good. What are...No sir. I kindly doubt these are end times. On what account? I'd just say it's highly unlikely. I think all this Y2K talk is a crock of you-know-what, excuse me. No, I certainly do mean that. That's right. I'll see you Sunday then."

He hung up the phone and looked at it, blowing his cheeks out. It rang again.

"Sheriff's office. Hello Mrs. Berresford...Oh I doubt that, Mrs. Berresford. No...of course. That's right. You're right. No I just got off the

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phone with Mr. Whitemore sayin the same thing. I think this is going to be a New Year's just like any other. Your money'll be fine in the bank. Okay now, tell Mr. Berresford I said hello. Bye."

He took off his glasses and massaged his face, groaning.

"Stacey?"

"Yes sir?"

"On second thought, why don't you take messages for me? I've got some paperwork needs done."

*

Reverend Hardy found more members in his congregation in the month of December than he ever had, crowding into the back and down the aisles with their collars pressed and their ties knotted snugly. They wouldn't let him preach. "From the Revelation of John," a woman yelled, "After the first resurrection they reigned with Christ in the new millennium!" For each voice that pierced the din, two more tried to replace it. The words *end of days*, *second coming*, *the new millennium*. Chaos in the house of God. The congregation stood, pointing at one another and screaming. The Reverend tried to placate them but he could not.

Ed Tom grabbed Jeanette's hand and they slipped toward the exit, shaking their heads. Frank Lapley was sitting quietly in the back pew by himself but Ed Tom looked the other way and they hurried out the door.

*

Just a few days later as Sheriff Wilson was parking outside the county courthouse he saw Harry Campbell coming down the road with a tin foil diaper over his jeans. He smiled broadly and inclined his head.

"Mornin Sheriff," he said.

Ed Tom smiled wryly. "Whaddya got there, Mr. Campbell?" he said.

Harry held his hands out, turning a full circle to display it. "Just in case it's spacemen comin, my wife doesn't want them gettin at my boys."

"Your boys?"

He winked. "You know."

Ed Tom massaged his eyes. "Oh Jesus Christ, Harry," he said.

*

That night, the 15th of December, he and Jeanette sat beside each other on the couch, she watching TV while he read. A half hour passed like this before she spoke.

"I only had eight kids in my class today."

"Eight?"

"The other twenty stayed home with their parents."

"Wow."

"Probably be less tomorrow," she said. "School's all but shutting

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down. You think...something's really gonna happen?"

"I don't know. I kinda doubt it."

"If this *is* it...what would you do?"

"I don't know. I guess I'd take the rest of the week off."

They both smiled in the darkness, the glow of the TV on their faces and necks.

"Really though, Ed Tom."

He sighed. "I don't know. I'd still take it one day at a time, I guess. Same as I always have."

Jeanette lifted the remote and turned the TV off. The picture shrunk to a line and then disappeared. The plastic crackled for a few moments afterward.

"You need to stop punishing Frank Lapley," she said. "His guilt's bad enough. It's not the Christian thing to do. And you need to stop punishing yourself."

Ed Tom just nodded.

"You're a good father," she told him.

"I was."

"He's still your son."

She heard him swallow, heard him breathe in through his nose. His voice was quiet.

"I miss him."

"He's proud of you. You're protecting all these people, and they need you the more right now. He's with Jesus."

"Thank you Jeanie."

She leaned over and kissed his forehead. "Good night, Ed Tom."

In the morning Ed Tom got a call from Marcus saying there had been a break-in at the grocery store. He turned the siren on and sped into town but with no traffic that early and only one stoplight he could have done without it. The grocery's front window was shattered and lying in pieces on the sidewalk. The light outside was soft and blue.

Ed Tom waited against his cruiser and watched Marcus helping a handcuffed old man down into his back seat. He shut the door gently behind him and walked across the parking lot toward the older officer, rubbing his hands and smiling goofily, shaking his head.

Ed Tom pointed. "Was that...?"

"Yessir."

"Chuck Barton?"

Marcus nodded. "Yup."

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"I've never seen such a thing."

"Gettin on seventy five is a little old to be robbing convenience stores," Marcus said.

"I'd agree."

"No offense."

"I'm only fifty-two Marcus."

The younger man smiled. "Yessir."

"Congratulations, by the way," Ed Tom said. "You and Brittany must be excited."

"We are. Hopin all of us are still around in eight months."

"Yeah," Ed Tom said. "You been inside yet?"

It took Marcus a moment to realize he meant the store. "No sir," he said. "I found Chuck fallen over in the parking lot. I was just putting the handcuffs on when you pulled in."

"I'd say we should have a look around."

"Yessir, I'd agree."

Most of the aisles had been thrown over, tipped out through the shattered window in the manner of dominoes. The sheriff and his deputy stepped over a heap of candybars and potato chips on the floor.

"Herb know what happened to his store?" Ed Tom asked.

"No sir. He don't open for another hour. I haven't called him yet."

Marcus walked behind the counter while Ed Tom stopped and looked at one of the few standing shelves. It was cleared off. He squatted and read the tag.

"Out of toilet paper," he mumbled. He stood. "How much did he take from the register?"

"Well, that's the peculiar thing, Sheriff," Marcus said, examining it.

"What is?"

"He didn't take no money."

"I'm sorry?"

"Not a cent. This register's not been opened."

"Well what was he doin here then, just gettin his groceries?"

"I guess he was. He had a few bags full up with toilet paper, batteries, and a few gallons of bottled water. Like he was getting ready for a power outage or something."

*

Three old timers sitting on the porchfront of the general store, gripping the chair arms and watching the square below with an air of judgment in the manner of kings. Ed Tom paused on the first stair, holding the banister and nodding to each in turn. "Norm," he said, "Carlton, Ornlly." He

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was admitted, mumbling, to their ranks and he stood leaning on his elbows, looking out with them over the intersection.

"What's the word?" he said.

Carlton spat into an empty water bottle he was holding across his lap. "Reckon you know more than we do," he said.

Ed Tom sighed. "I wish I did."

"You think something's gonna happen?"

Ed Tom gripped the banister, looking out. He exhaled. "I don't know. It's hard to tell what's comin, Carlton. Sometimes...the future just gets taken from you."

"You thinkin about your boy?" Ornlly said. He poured coffee out of a thermos and slurped it.

Ed Tom ran his tongue along his teeth, nodding. He didn't look at him to answer. "I usually am," he said.

"There's naught anybody could've done. It's not for us to put the blame on anyone."

Ed Tom nodded. "No, it's not," he said.

"There are things you can't get away from. They become part of you. If you don't face them you take them with you the rest of your life, even if you'd just as soon elect not to. You try and leave em here and they'll just follow you on to the next place and the one after that."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Ed Tom said.

*

Ed Tom responded to a call the next week, after a snowfall, at the Blakely farm just outside of Dushore. One of Mrs. Blakely's horses had been running onto Dave Keller's property every day for almost a week, stirring up the animals and tramping down the feed bales, and Dave would have to bridle her every time and lead her back. He'd called Ed Tom and Ed Tom agreed to go and have a talk with Mrs. Blakely.

She showed him into the barn, the dry smell of hay and earth and animals, and they stood in the stall around the horse. Ed Tom crossed his arms and studied it, pacing a circle around the animal. Rheumy yellow eyes. The skin pulled tight across the ribs. She was stamping in the hay, hot white breath pluming from her nostrils.

"Mrs. Blakely," he said, "I think you've got yourself a real sick animal."

"Yeah," she said.

"Well have you called a vet? I'd say Doc Hastings'd help you out. He'd know more about it than I do."

"I called Doc Hastings, yeah."

"What'd he tell you?"

"Said some antibiotics would have her cleared up in two or three months."

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"Well there you go."

"I don't think so."

"Why's that?"

"Not gonna make much of a difference after the first, right Sheriff? I'm not makin any plans two or three months from now, it just doesn't make sense. You wouldn't order somethin in the mail you weren't gonna be around to pick up."

*

New Year's Eve, Ed Tom was coming down 87 with the radio on. He was patrolling that night, but no one was out anyway. He hadn't seen a car all night, and it was almost 11:30 now. Jeanette was spending New Years with Marcus's newly pregnant wife, no matter what might happen at midnight. Ed Tom was tired. The headlights ran like ghosts across the trees.

He came up behind a broken down Ford pulled over onto the shoulder with its four ways on. He recognized the truck. He could see a man leaning under the hood, steam rising up into the air.

Ed Tom looked in the rearview mirror. The dimly illuminated road stretching away into darkness. There was no one coming for miles, maybe wouldn't be all night, and there was nothing but bare forest in every direction. Sighing, he slowed to a stop and rolled down the passenger side window. Cold air was sucked in violently.

The man jogged up to the window, blowing on his hands for warmth, and Ed Tom recognized Frank before Frank recognized him. As he ducked down, smiling, Ed Tom watched him open his mouth to speak and then shut it, realizing. He bit his lower lip. Then he stood up and took a step back from the car, looking to where maybe another pair of headlights would appear, maybe not.

Ed Tom looked out the windshield. He exhaled. "Get in," he sighed.

They didn't talk all the way into town. Frank kept glancing sideways at Ed Tom but Ed Tom mostly kept his eyes on the road, driving with his wrists resting on the wheel. Once, at a stretch when Frank was distracted staring out his window, Ed Tom studied him. Frank looked older, he looked beaten. They drove on, both men declining to speak, staring blank-faced out the window at the world, though it was invisible beyond the reach of the headlights.

*

He pulled the car into Frank's driveway, gravel crunching beneath the tires, and shut it off. Ed Tom listened to the wet sound of Frank's mouth opening, his tongue moving nervously over his teeth. His hand was on the door handle.

"Thanks," Frank said.

"Yeah."

"Listen I..."

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"It's okay."

"I wish it had been me."

"Don't say that. Wishin you were dead doesn't do any more than wishin he was alive."

"Not a day's gone by..."

"No, it hasn't."

Neither of them moved, just sitting, breathing. The world outside was still.

"What time is it?" Frank asked.

Ed Tom turned the key halfway. "12:17," he read.

"Well, I guess that answers that."

"I guess it does."

"You know, I almost wished something *would* happen," Frank said.

"It would make some things easier, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Life goes on, even when it doesn't look like it. Even when you don't want it to."

Frank turned to him in the seat. "Thanks, Ed Tom."

"I'll see you around Frank."

Ed Tom watched him walk up to the darkened house, passing quickly through the headlights and then disappearing. He sat for a moment, looking out the window. It was a clear night, and the stars were out.

After a little while, he backed the cruiser down the driveway, pulling out onto 87 and heading into town. The traffic light was blinking over the intersection and he stopped the car and sat watching it. Yellow, black, yellow, black. It was hypnotizing. The street flooded in spurts of artificial light.

Ed Tom sat a while, remembering. Then he went home.