

Wilderness House Literary Review 7/4

Roberto C Garcia
Sinking

He got up and peered through the blinds. Cold air slithered through the window frame. His cousin Alvin should've been back by now. He went to get more beer almost forty minutes ago. A long time considering the liquor store wasn't even a full block away. The main street felt tense, desolate and cold. A man ran across it pressing his coat around his chest and throat. There was talk of trouble on the radio. The police had beaten a black boy and the community was angry. Carl hated living on the main street for that very reason. Trouble in the neighborhood put the little rooming house where he lived front and center.

A police car crept by and spotlighted the houses on Carl's side of the street. He stepped away from the window. The spotlight created shadows on the wall in his room. After it passed he saw Alvin walking up to the house. He was with a woman and she was pushing a double stroller. Two little figures were bundled up in the stroller, one leaning over.

"It took you long enough!" Carl said, opening the door.

"Look, I brought us some company." Alvin replied.

In the light of the foyer Carl recognized the woman. He didn't know her name but he knew her from the shopping district. He worked there but was laid off. She was always around pushing her kids in that stroller. Alvin motioned them into his room.

"Don't I know you?" The woman asked Carl as she took off her coat. She was shapely. 'Her body's benefited from having children.' Carl thought. 'She must have started out skinny, borderline bony, but then curved out with the weight gain.'

Her eyes were big and round but soft.

"I've seen you around. I'm Carl." Carl was looking in the brown bag for his twenty two ounce beer. She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

"So what's good Terry, awful night to be out?" Alvin smirked and put the beer to his mouth. He sat with his legs open wide. He wore a dirty tank top with a hole where his belly button was. Carl swigged his beer and looked on.

"You know how it is Alvin? Girl's got to take the bull by the balls sometimes." She sighed. "Listen, I've got to check the girl's diapers. Would you mind?"

"Sure, just be quick. The landlord doesn't like anyone in the foyer for too long." Alvin replied.

Alvin swigged his beer and Carl held his pensively. They stood face to face in the half lit foyer. Alvin was much shorter and hated standing face to face.

"What's all that bull by the balls business?" Carl asked.

"She left her old man. He's running around with some chickie and she

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found out about it.”

Carl looked back at the door and took a long swig of his beer.

“Is that right? You feel like babysitting?” Carl smiled and they both laughed.

“No sir! She is all mines. I scooped her up.” Alvin poked Carl in the chest as he spoke, timing each poke with his words.

“Come on man. Don’t you see she has her kids with her? That would just be heartless.” Carl said looking back at the door. Both men drank deep from their beers.

“I’m almost out.” Alvin said, shaking the bottle. He raised it up and looked at it from the bottom.

The door opened and Terry poked her head out. Carl waited for Alvin to go first then followed him in. The two little girls were awake and walking around the small room. They were cute but Carl noticed their dirty clothes and unkempt hair. Alvin tried to start an intimate conversation with Terry.

“Well goodnight everyone.” Carl said and headed for the door.

“Leaving already?” Terry asked.

“Yep, I’m going upstairs to bed.” Carl looked at Alvin and Alvin rolled his eyes towards the kids. “The four of you have a good time.”

Up in his room Carl wondered if Alvin would really do it. A part of him welcomed such a test. She looked good and Carl believed Terry might want him.

There was a commotion on the street. Carl looked out the window. A crowd of black men with sticks and pickets signs marched right down the middle of the street. He looked around his room for something to board the window with in case there was a riot.

‘It’s miserable living like this.’ Carl thought. For Alvin and the others living in this miserable house was fine but Carl was dying slowly every day. He considered it a great defeat to have to live here. And the cops and hoods running rackets on his doorstep make it worse.

‘Damn it. I want another beer,’ Carl thought, ‘just one more to get to sleep.’

A police van followed by two cars sped down the main street. There was a great sound of windows breaking and men screaming. Then a knock at his door, it was Alvin.

“What happened?”

“She’s not into it.” Alvin was disgusted. “I think she likes you though. I’m about to

kick her out. Should I send her up here?”

“I don’t know.” Alvin screwed up his face at Carl. “Oh—alright.” Carl said, glancing at the window.

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"Here, take this." Alvin gave Carl a nip can of beer and walked away.

She sat on the bed. Her kids were asleep in their stroller. The room was small and the stroller, in the center, took up space.

"What are your plans?"

"Do you have any cigarettes?"

"No, I don't smoke." He replied. He moved over and sat next to her on the bed.

She leaned in and rested her hand on the inside of his thigh. With his free arm he reached and turned on the radio. The news was on. Carl meant to put some music on but she asked him to leave on the news. Carl reached over again and opened the nip can of beer Alvin gave him.

"Want some?" Terry took a sip. Carl made his move.

They rubbed each other carefully. Carl looked over at the stroller often. Terry told him not to worry because the girls would sleep through the night.

"Listen Carl, I know we just met but" she hesitated, "I really need to change my life."

"I can't go on like this."

"What about your husband?" Carl asked.

"We're not married. He's a bum anyway, running around on me all the time." She looked up at him.

Carl couldn't see her eyes in the dark but he knew they were on him. He moved his hand to the small of her back and slid his hand into her underwear. She stopped him.

"I don't want to make another mistake Carl. I hardly know you but I can tell you're a good guy. I wouldn't be making a mistake with you would I Carl?"

He thought about those little girls sleeping in the stroller.

"I am a good guy but you can't think in terms of mistakes."

"But my girls need a man they can call daddy. I need a real man. Just tell me you can be that and you can have me." She wrapped her leg around his.

'Lying is easy,' he thought, 'but the afterward, the having to kick her out.'

The smell of her hair and breath were drowning him. She rubbed his shoulder then clawed gently at the hair on his chest. One of her daughters sighed in her sleep. It was a deep tired sigh that repeated twice and faded back into natural breathing. That's when Carl's fire and lust were doused.

"I think you should leave."

A scream from outside made her jump deeper into his body. Carl could feel both of their hearts trying to break free of them. More screaming, but not like that of women, of men. Shots were fired. Carl crept along

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the wall and peered through the blinds. The scene was chaos. Policemen beat people with batons. Police dogs were running people down. A full blown riot was unfolding right in front of the rooming house.

“What’s happening?” Terry whispered. She moved the stroller closer to the bed.

“It’s a riot. It’s terrible, just terrible.” Carl realized that he couldn’t get rid of Terry now. He’d be a real bastard to send her out on the street with those two little girls in the middle of a riot.

“Come back to bed Carl. Get away from that window.”

Carl wondered what was more dangerous. He went to bed. Terry started in on him again.

“Get some sleep Terry. Everything will be alright.”

He patted her on the back lightly and she turned around. Carl desperately wanted to be rid of her now. He felt ashamed.

“I don’t know if I have enough milk for the girls when they wake up in the morning.” Terry’s voice filtered out of her elbow.

In the morning Carl went to the store. He had five dollars in his pocket and spent half of it on a quart of milk. He left it on the night table and woke Terry up.

“I left some milk for the girls. When you’re done just make sure you lock the door. I hope everything works out for you.”

Carl turned quickly and walked out. He stepped out into the street and saw the aftermath. There was still a police van parked up the street. People hung around talking about things. The tension was out of the air. Everyone acted like they wanted to move on. People are always in a hurry to forget the unpleasant and distasteful. Carl didn’t judge. He wanted to get this Terry business over with too. At noon he decided to go back to the room.

When he opened the door Terry was still there with her kids. The look on his face must have said everything.

“You know Carl, I have nowhere to go. I’m starting to think you don’t want me here.” Terry burrowed her eyes into his face.

‘So this is how you want to play it.’ Carl thought.

“Well, you can start by going back to your old man. Personally I don’t care. You can’t stay here though so please get out.” He kept a straight and even expression as he spoke.

The little girls looked at him. He hoped they couldn’t understand him. Terry began to speak but Carl stopped her by holding the door open.

“Come on Terry get out. Go back to the father of your children.”

Carl stared at the wall. She stood up and walked over to him. She held him by the arm.

“We could put the girls down for a nap and talk about it.” Terry was up on him now. He was enraged and thought he might strike her.

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“Get out.” Carl pulled his arm away and threw the girls coats at her. He was about to push the stroller into the hall but she pushed him away.

She walked out and slammed the door shut behind her. Carl could hear her in the hallway dressing the kids. The girls started crying. Carl stared at the walls of his small room. He wanted to get out of that damned rooming house. His bed felt like quick sand.