

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

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Good Neighbors

Abe knew he had a decision to make. The delaying and excuses had gone on all spring and into the summer. The heat hung in the air as he left his car. It filled his lungs and crept down his back in small beads of sweat. He stood for a moment, holding the bar's door open, searching for thunderclouds coming off the lake. If you were lucky, you could see them swelling up out on Lake St. Clair and you could get under cover before they swept over Windsor. He saw none and knew that the next day his collared shirt would stick to his back under his suit jacket. Even though Greyson, the architectural firm's owner, did not talk about dress code, every one of his employees knew that to work in the business one had to dress the part. Cheap suits, stained collars, or scuffed shoes would be shown the door before the interview started.

"The heat's been bad enough this summer," called out the bartender. "No sense letting it ruin the afternoon."

Abe closed the door. It was a cheap place with mismatched strings of Christmas lights along the walls, bar stools with cracked vinyl and small tables that didn't sit straight. Wineglasses hung from the ceiling, but Abe had never seen one taken down. The smell of stale bodies was not yet strong and barely visible motes of dust passed through the few shafts of light coming down through the small windows. He had watched these beams cut straight lines across the floor several days in a row. He admired them for their certainty and precision. He felt no one else had truly seen them for what they were.

The bartender, in his fifties and still trying to grow his hair out despite its retreat from his forehead, quickly wiped the space in front of Abe's stool with a rag cut from an old t-shirt. Just as quickly, he lifted a smudged pint glass full of beer and placed it in on the bar-top. Abe nodded. The bartender continued his round, serving the few men who crouched at the bar. Each alone in his solitude. None interested in what the other might offer. When he turned back at bar's end, he tossed the rag beneath the counter and undid the top buttons on his patterned shirt. Abe heard the fan blades cutting through the air. They must go on forever, he thought.

The door opened and a thick-set older man stepped in. Abe heard his shuffling walk and knew that he had seen this man here before. He couldn't remember when and was surprised when he took a seat two over from him.

"Get me a pint there, Ray," the man said in a voice that had surprising warmth. "Carol working the grill yet?"

The bartender brought the man his beer and a menu. The man laid a thick hand on top of the menu and, without opening it, he ordered fries and a burger with no onions. He lifted his glass up and inspected the golden colour of beer. He turned and caught Abe looking at him. He nodded and closed his eyes as he drank deeply. Abe lifted his glass hesitantly but did not drink, imagining that in 45 years he too might be like this man. He hoped he would be running his own firm, would have left this city, and would have lines on his face that spoke of impromptu European vaca-

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tions.

"I'm Rory," said the man. He glanced at the stool next to Abe, waiting for permission before switching seats. He stuck out his hand and Abe took it, afraid that the callused fingers would crush his. "Seen you here a few times."

Abe nodded. The bar's jukebox wouldn't turn on until later in the afternoon when the construction crews finished and came in to hear loud rock music while eating the greasy fare. He looked out the window and imagined Sera at home, working on her computer, trying to keep up with the demands of her burgeoning professional writing business. Her office was crowded with sagging bookshelves, a heavy and scarred wooden desk they'd bought from a yard sale, and framed photos of the countryside around Windsor: Point Pelee, Belle River, Jack Miner Bird Sanctuary, Leamington's tomato factory.

"It's close enough to the office and far enough from home," said Abe.

"Beer's cheap too," said Rory. A heavy-set woman with a greasy apron emerged from the kitchen and set a plate in front of Rory. There was a sloppily-made hamburger with lettuce spilling out the sides and oily fries that hung limply.

"You seem familiar. You work in construction?" asked Rory as he picked off some of the lettuce before biting into the burger.

"Junior architect at Greyson Inc.," said Abe. He saw flecks of grey mortar on Rory's jacket sleeves. He tried to place Rory's face but could not.

"In another time, I would be called a stone mason. Now it's mostly block-laying for box stores," said Rory.

"You work on that strip mall out by the airport?" said Abe. "I designed the plazas."

"They were a step up from most of the work we do," said Rory, between mouthfuls. "That owner was a real prick though."

"He called me four times a day for seven months," said Abe. "I'm just glad he didn't have my home number."

"Even though they're paying, you sometimes want to slap them around a bit," said Rory. He wiped his mouth with a napkin and pushed the half-finished plate of fries away from him. "I've been a brick-layer since quitting school, and I only once told an owner off. I was young, it was hot, and the asshole thought he could push me around."

They talked about design and technique. Abe was surprised at how much Rory knew about structural integrity and load-bearing walls. He felt Rory was happy to have someone in a suit who could sympathize with the workers. Someone who designed walls that were practical but looked good. Rory said he missed the times when brick laying was an art. Abe said most buildings follow the same plan now, no imagination in a single square foot. The bartender continued to serve them and the door swung open and closed, a mouth inhaling life from the streets. A Portuguese paving crew and a couple of electricians showed up. Rory knew most of these men by sight and nodded to them. Abe recognized the logos on their com-

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pany jackets, and he thought he had seen one before, perhaps a foreman.

"Why are you still working for someone else at your age?" asked Abe.

"I'm not that old," laughed Rory as he shook Abe's shoulder with his hand.

"You know your stuff and you could make more money on your own" said Abe.

"I never had a mind for pricing. Too cut-throat. Besides, I pretty much run the crews," said Rory. "Eleanor, my wife, she wanted me to a long time ago. But times were tight. GM and Chrysler were laying people off. No sense starting up when no one's building."

"Kids?" asked Abe. He looked to the door as several more men entered. Factory men with work written across their face in heavy lines and veins of grease on their hands.

"Two. One grown up and gone out west. The other killed on a job site when he was sixteen."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked," said Abe.

"A forklift hit a pothole. The steel beam it was carrying bounced off and pinned my son to the wall," said Rory. "That's what I was told. I'd been working inside the building and the super didn't want to tell me. Scared I might lose it or something. Didn't want me to see him pinned to the wall."

Abe watched Rory's face for emotion. He saw no change. He said he would pay for the next round if Rory was staying. He told Rory about Sera, about their condo down by the waterfront, about meeting her in Toronto, the years of dating and the big wedding. She was from the area and had had enough of the big city a year ago. Abe had left a job with a big firm with offices in Calgary, Vancouver, and Toronto for Greyson's company. Big fish to small fry, he called it. But he liked the river, he liked the people, and the Tigers were going make the World Series this year.

Abe could see the darkness washing over the few windows and he knew men were heading home to their wives. Outside, he knew the sun approached the horizon and would light the Renaissance Centre on fire, golden light illuminating the sleek black towers. Abe remembered seeing this for the first time. He told Sera about driving down Ouellette and thinking the Centre was a part of Windsor. She had laughed and Abe hid his disappointment. He felt more and more disappointed with Windsor. The city cowered in Detroit's shadow. He didn't tell Sera this. Inside the bar, each man faced the choice: to stay for another or face the dark outside.

Abe went to the bathroom and Rory made small talk with a paving crew seated at a nearby table. The bartender was busier now, ringing up orders and pouring beer from one of the few taps. A dish boy had shown up an hour ago and was collecting empty glasses from the tables and bringing them into the back room to be cleaned. He crossed the floor with a nervous energy and the men smiled at him. As Abe returned from the bathroom, he wondered if Rory had ever taken one of his sons to this bar.

"Well, Sera's probably got something on the stove by now," said Abe.

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He put his hand on the bar for a moment and pretended Rory hadn't noticed.

"Been caught for a DUI before?" said Rory. His slate eyes looked out from thick eyebrows at Abe's stubbled face. Abe blinked twice and shook his head.

"Never a good thing," said Rory. "Cops have no mercy anymore. No nods or don't do it again. Just business now."

"Sera can wait," said Abe. "That's only fair. She's making me wait for a vacation in Greece."

Abe sat on the stool. He raised his hand at the bartender. The bartender paused for a moment to acknowledge the order.

"We'll get a cab later," said Rory and he put a hand on Abe's back as if to comfort him.

They talked of Windsor, of politicians and corruption and developers who didn't pay. For an hour, they talked with a Detroit businessman out for a night on the town. He was slim and wore an expensive Italian suit. He dropped hints about heading to a strip club, but Rory and Abe ignored them. He departed with a shrug, but left a 50 dollar bill to cover the round.

They paid and tipped the bartender. On the street, the heat still hung in the air. Night had enveloped the city and they agreed to split the cab.

"Detroit looks so close you could swim to it," said Abe.

"Would be a foolish thing to try," said Rory. "I knew men who used to do it. Crazy men from out near Russia who swam inland seas to escape the Iron Curtain."

"What's it like being with someone for so long?" asked Abe. "I've only been married two years and it feels like forever."

"It's comfortable," said Rory. "My son out west, he's on his second now. Turns out the first wasn't the right fit."

"It was good for a while. Now I don't know," said Abe. "She wants kids and a place in La Salle. She hates that our house looks like every other house on the block."

Rory nodded and waited for Abe to continue.

"I'm designing strip malls now. In Toronto, I worked on waterfront condos."

"Windsor's not all bad," said Rory. "They're cleaning up the river. The casino's good for a night out. And you don't spend half the damn day in traffic."

They laughed and got in the cab. When they told the driver the addresses, they realized they lived only a few blocks apart. They talked of the neighborhood, the Italian couple with their miniature vineyard in the back, and the teenagers walking in groups at night. They both got out at Rory's place because Abe figured the walk home would do him good.

"Look, some decisions just need to be made. Thinking about it too

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much will confuse you and the choice will still remain," said Rory. "Let me tell you about something I did once, something that I've often thought about. Something I did after thinking about it for too long. I worked with a man for 15 years. He was your average man, some days good to work with, others he drove you crazy. He drank like any of us, but when he went home he beat his wife. Now, what a man does in his home is his business. But he would talk it up at work the next day. He'd make his wife sit in the car with black eyes and bruised arms. Around the time my second son was born, I had enough. I confronted him. He laughed in my face. His wife was in the car the next day. I waited another 3 years before I did anything. One day I knew he'd be finishing a column a couple feet away from the edge of the scaffold. He was lazy, we all were. He wouldn't put on an extra piece of scaffold for that. He'd lean out. I knew this. That morning, I pulled the safety slots off the bottom of the boards. A few hours later I'm still working on the other side of the building and I hear the scaffold boards crashing down four stories. I let the other men tell me what happened."

Abe looked down at Rory's leather work boots and stared. A light came on in Rory's house and a head was silhouetted at the window beside the door.

"Why don't you come in for a drink," said Rory. Abe saw the inside of the house glow golden behind the black outline of Rory's wife. She touched the curtains.

"I should go home," said Abe.

Rory put his hand on Abe's shoulder and squeezed. Rory smiled as he turned towards the door.

The sky was black and punctured with white stars. Abe walked home. He walked down the street and he turned south and then, further along, turned east. He passed the house with the vineyard and he walked by a car that had been parked on the street for a month. Further on he saw his house, with the lights turned out and the garage door left open like a big black mouth, shocked by the stillness of the neighborhood.