

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/3

Rose Betit

Waiting for Jesus

It's about 1:00 in the afternoon on a very muggy day in July. I'm sitting on the floor in the living room playing with the fan with my little brother, Joseph, like we'd been warned a thousand times not to do. To hear mama tell it, anyone that'd be so foolish as to play with a running fan don't have no real appreciation for what it means to have all his fingers intact and if we was to accidentally cut ourselves, don't come running to her expecting all kinds of pity. 'Cause she done warned us... "a thousand times," she'd always add. She can never leave that warning without adding at the end, "a thousand times."

The thing Joseph likes to do most with the fan is talk into it and listen how the fan blades cut our voices up when it goes around. So I'm sitting here and making "maaaaaaaaah" sounds into the fan and he's giggling and covering his mouth so our mama in the other room won't peek in to see what's so hilarious happening with us and give us the warning about the chance we might get our fingers chopped off.

The Carpenters are belting out some song about rainy days and Mondays from my big brother's FM radio. So, I figure I'll amuse Joseph by joining in on the song, into the fan, of course. "Rainy Daaaaaaaays and Mondays aaaaaalways get me down." I stretch out the words so the fan blade has more to chop. It's just in the middle of "aaaaaaalways" when the fan suddenly stops. And so do the Carpenters. And out goes the overhead light in the kitchen. And off goes the refrigerator with a rattle and a thump in the back of it.

We expected it would happen since we got the red tag and a note on the door warning us to pay the electric bill at once or else "services will be interrupted", with the "services will be interrupted" part in bold letters to call our attention to it and to let us know that they meant business down at the City Utilities Company. Mama's new job at the Hasty House didn't pay as much tips as she hoped it would and she won't be getting a pay check for at least two weeks 'cause, as my mama tells it, "the greedy som'bitches got to hold back her pay for two weeks." That meant at least two weeks in the dark, maybe longer, 'cause once you get the lights off, you have to pay a reconnect fee, which, as mama tells it, really adds up. Sometimes we'd have the money for the bill to them turned back on, but no reconnect fee money. So, then we had to wait again until the first of the month, when the government check came.

The City Utility Company turns off the utilities in phases and I ain't quite figured out if it's out of kindness they do it that way. Or is it as a punishment? After your lights are cut you have a couple of days to pay before they go to the next phase and cut off the gas. A couple of days from that, if no bill is paid, then off goes the water. In a way, it seems kind not to have it all go at once, because once the lights go out, we know we have time to gather up some water in milk jugs to use in the coming days after the water is cut too. And if that saved up water went gone – and it usually does – we have to march across the way to the neighbors' with our milk jugs in hand to borrow water. Mama says there ain't nothing that

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can bring a person much lower than when he has to borrow his water for drinking 'cause he can't afford to have some of his own.

So everything has done gone silent and still. The air is hanging thick in our faces without the fan to blow it around. Mama is sitting in the dark kitchen as quiet as a mouse and my brother, Stephen, who is 15 and knows almost everything, came out into the living room with a book called *Pappillon* in his hand.

"You wanna come listen to me read for a while?" he asked, while he's wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his forearm and somehow getting it on his book, making the edges of the pages wet.

"I reckon so." I say and take Joseph by the hand and into Stephen's room where the Carpenters ain't singing no more. Joseph stretched out on the bed next to Stephen and fell asleep before the reading got going. I sat up and listened while Stephen read, making special voices for each character. I like to watch his facial expression change with each scene and sometimes his hands fly up in the air all animated, like he's acting out each one all by himself. Lots of times he stops and pauses and turns pages and doesn't look up at all while he's doing this. I know what he's doing, though he doesn't know that I know. 'Cause once I snuck in his room and took me a peek in the story of *Pappillon* to see if I could figure out why he seemed to be skipping parts. What I found was cuss words. Lots of 'em. And scenes that had violence and sex in 'em that young'uns like myself or Joseph weren't supposed to know about yet.

I always felt lucky to have a brother like Stephen 'cause when all the other ten year olds in school are reading chapter books about a pig named Wilber with a spider friend named Charlotte, I'm here listening to stories about *Pappillon* who is in prison facing all kinds of hardship and wishing to the Lord one day he could be like some sort of butterfly and fly up away from that place. Seemed like the story of *Pappillon* would be more valuable to me seeing as I have near 'bout the same kind of wish for myself and maybe somehow, if he learned how to escape from all his sufferings, then maybe so could I. And if I could figure that out on account of this story book, I'd be so proud, I'd bring the book to school and show it to my teacher who would be so happy to see a child my age interested in grown up stories that she'd tell me how incredible it is that I could be so wise and yet so young.

That ain't quite what happened, though. Once I mentioned to my teacher that my brother was reading the story of *Pappillon* to me, she said, "Oh dear! With such profanities and all?!", and she sent a note home to my mama, which I threw away instead of giving it to her. 'Cause if I'd give it to her she'd make Stephen throw out his book and then I may well never learn how to fly away like a butterfly from some place terrible.

Anyway, Stephen read like that for at least an hour before the heat of the day was about to put both of us to sleep so he decides he'd best give in to it and stretched out next to Joseph and fell asleep. Stephen says the best thing to do when our electricity is off is just go on to sleep, even if it's the middle of the day. That way, you don't even feel how the day crawls by as slow as molasses.

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And when night comes, we sit huddled on the living room floor with a lit candle stick in the middle of us. The light flickers orangey yellow on our faces while we squint to play go fish until the candle burns down and then we feel our way to the couch for the night, 'cause none of us like to be alone in the cinder block bedrooms where the darkness is weighty and smothering. I'm always the last young'un awake and I lay there for the longest time watching the red tip from Mama's cigarette getting bright and then dim with each time she takes a puff. In between puffs she sighs real heavy and makes clacking sounds with her false teeth like she does when she's upset.

So, right now, while my brothers are sleeping away the slow moving afternoon, I'm laying down at the foot of Stephen's bed and watching the dust floating around in the sun rays pouring in through the window. I blow at pieces of dust and wave them around with my hand, watching them swirl around and then drift on downward like a slow motion picture. I wonder if I try to count the dust specks if it'll help me fall asleep.

I can't sleep, though, so I decide to go back out into the living room or to go see what mama is doing. I wonder if I'm the only one awake in the house. I walk tip toe down the hall, running my fingernails across the grime on the cinder block wall and take a pause to look at where I was showing Joseph how to write his name by scraping in the grime with a little stick before Mama screamed at us that we were like pigs playing in the filth. So we left it there, in the middle of Joseph's name with a backward "S" hanging at the end sideways.

When I turn the corner into the living room, I know Mama's not asleep. I can hear her, still in the kitchen, whispering something to Jesus. I climb up on the back of the green couch that's under the living room windows and lay on my stomach. I lay my head so I can see Mama sitting at the kitchen window, a sort of a grey silhouette, there with her cigarette and whispered prayers.

When the utilities are cut or the food is low, she sits at this window like this a lot. She always seems like she's waiting for someone there. She's just watching and smoking out the window, with the smoke from the cigarette flowing from her nose and mouth, dancing twirls around the green leaves of the avocado plant floating in water in the mayonnaise jar that's on the sill. Then the smoke wanders upward and out the window through the screen, leaving the plant abandoned.

I know what Mama is waiting for sitting there by that window. She's waiting for Jesus to come, that's what. I figured as much 'cause once she said to me just out of the blue, " One day Jesus is gonna come and there'll be no more waitin'. We won't suffer no more. There won't be no pain and we won't be hungry no more. There'll be milk and honey flowin' and that's what we'll eat. We'll be able to eat all we want." And she went and perched herself by the window, smoking and waiting for that glorious day.

I remember thinking to myself how fine that would be that that there would be no more pain and suffering and hunger, but I couldn't understand why a person would want to get full on milk and honey, if he's in heaven, and certainly there must be other choices of what to eat in heaven.

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In any case, while I lay there watching my mama wait for the second coming of Christ, I had a feeling that glorious day wasn't gonna be today, 'cause my Sunday school teacher said that Jesus left about 2000 years ago and said he was coming back "in the twinkling of an eye" and ain't no one seen nor heard from him since. Now, I ain't that smart of a young'un, but my Sunday school teacher also told us that children lots of times got some kind of "infantile wisdom" that tells them truth 'cause their young hearts are opened to it. Me and my "infantile wisdom" keeps thinking that if it's been 2000 years, that's a lot of days Jesus ain't showed hide nor hair of himself. Something inside me tells me there ain't nothing special about this day that would make the Lord want to pick it to re-appear on.

I thought about telling my mama what I'm thinking, but about the worse thing you can tell a person on a hot summer day in July when the fan went dead, the lights went out, and the refrigerator went silent with a gurgle, rattle, and a thump in the back of it, is that the one she's sitting by the window and waiting for, probably ain't gonna pick this day apart from all the days of 2000 years worth of days to come again in glory.

So I just lay there on the back of that couch, under the window and listened to mama whisper. Right about that time, God blessed me with a little breeze that made the raggedy edges of the curtain behind the couch rise up and brush across my face. I fell asleep then and dreamed that angels were brushing my cheek with their feathery fingertips.