

## Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

*James William Gardner*  
**The Steel Room**

**T**o Del Shockley it felt like being locked in a steel room; one with a heavy coat of dark green paint on the walls and the door. It was like a vault, but the door had a window in it. It was one of those old fashioned windows with the thick wire mesh safety glass and there were always people looking in. He used to yell when he saw them for someone to go get a key and let him out. But, no one ever did and so he didn't even bother anymore.

It was after twelve when he opened his eyes. He'd been asleep for over fifteen hours. He sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed. They were swollen and so were his feet. His toes looked like little Vienna sausages. He could wiggle them, but he could barely feel them anymore. The diabetes caused the neuropathy. He felt numbness nearly up to his knees and a hot, throbbing pain. The bloating was due primarily to the extra weight he was carrying.

"You know if you'd just lose about a hundred pounds it would solve both of your problems," his dad told him as if losing a hundred pounds was as easy as falling off a log. "You eat enough for ten people, anyway."

He was on medication for diabetes and for high blood pressure. His psychiatrist also had him on three antidepressants and a daily dose of Ritalin for good measure. Some times he took it and sometimes he'd forget. Sometimes he just didn't take it because he didn't feel like it.

"How're you doing today," his sister would say.

"Well, you know," he'd say.

"Did you take your meds? I don't know how you expect not to feel bad if you don't take what the doctors have prescribed?"

She seemed to put a great deal of stock in the medications, but Del Shockley knew it was just something to say; an easy way to act like she gave a shit. He knew that all she really wanted to do was to get off the phone.

Most people don't understand depression anyway. You've got to go through it to have any real appreciation for what's it's like. You've got to be locked in the steel room for a while. Hell, most people don't have the time. They're busy dealing with their own problems. Del Shockley had come to understand that the hard way. Now, he was sick of begging for help and so he kept his mouth shut. Depression was a solitary condition anyway.

"It could be a lot worse," his sister would say. She though it was helpful to draw comparisons like depression was some kind of logical choice that reason could alleviate. "You ought to be thankful you're not like Tommy Blevins. He's really got something to be depressed about, but he seems to be doing alright."

"Well, good for Tommy Blevins," he'd say. The whole approach was insulting to him and it just served to show that she didn't have a clue.

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Psychiatrists, therapists, group discussions, they were all next to worthless. He didn't care. Hell, he'd suffered from it since he was in college and he figured he go right on the rest of his life. He leaned over and got a cigarette from the pack on the nightstand.

"Do you think that you're trying to commit slow suicide?" his therapist asked him. "I mean the way you smoke and eat and the fact that you don't take your diabetes and blood pressure medicine like you're supposed to?"

"Maybe," he said. "I've just reached to point where I don't care anymore."

Oh, he'd tried to commit suicide more then once, but secretly he knew that he just didn't have the balls to go through with it. It wasn't that he wanted to live. On the contrary, he wanted to die. The problem was that he just couldn't get past the idea of going to hell. While most people struggle to believe in Christ, he struggled to disbelieve. But, try as he might he just couldn't do it. So he was stuck; stuck waiting and wanting to die.

"Oh Del," they all said. "You've got so much to offer; so much to live for."

"Well, you can't give very much when you're crippled with God damn depression!" He lit the cigarette, inhaled and then blew the smoke into the air.

Then they'd say: "what about your son and your nephews? They love you so much. Think what it would do to them if you weren't around anymore.

"Weren't around any more? You mean if I killed myself? Well, you don't need to worry about that," he assured them. Besides, you can't live for other people. Anyone who has been in that position knows that all too well. Suicide is a supremely selfish act. It has to be. No one else can figure into the equation.

Who gives a damn anyway? You sit around and mope for a few days in between watching the football games and going to the steakhouse. You get dressed and go to the damn visitation for a couple hours. Then there's the funeral and another trip to the steakhouse and it's all over. Everybody goes about their business and anybody who thinks that by committing suicide they're going to have any lasting impact on anybody else it just kidding themselves.

He finished the cigarette and pressed the butt out in the ashtray. Awe, it's all bullshit. The only one who cares about you is you when you get right down to it.

He sat there in the steel room with his distended legs outstretched. He could hear the muffled sound of voices from beyond the door and see the shadowy faces of people trying to look in through the window. It was hot in there and hard to breathe. He stood up and paced back and forth from wall to wall.

What should he do today he thought? He needed smokes. He knew he was about out of those. He needed something to eat too. Maybe he'd go to the grocery store and get stuff to make spaghetti or he could just go to the McDonalds and order a bunch of dollar chicken sandwiches and bring

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them back and heat them up in the microwave when he got hungry. That would probably end up being cheaper and he could get enough to last for several days. He'd do that.

He walked into the bathroom and stared at himself in the mirror. God, he looked like a damn bloated hog or something. He needed a shave and a shower badly. It had been five days since he'd been out of the apartment. He stunk so bad he could smell himself. He dropped his boxers, turned on the spigot and climbed into the tub. The hot water felt good. He stood there with his eyes closed and let the water run over his head and down his back.

"Open the door," he shouted. His voice seemed to echo off the green steel walls. But, he knew there was no one there.