

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

Chad MacDonald

I Wondered Why He Used One Shot

I HEARD A SCREAM COMING FROM OUT THE KITCHEN WINDOW. My bed springs popped and snapped as I rolled off the top of the mattress. The blanket dragged behind me like a lizard's tail. It was only one quick loud scream, and then silence. Not even an echo followed it.

Orange streetlights bled through the closed blinds. Ma's room was shut, she liked sleeping with the door closed. I walked past the door, and peeped between the blinds' blades, spreading them apart with the tips of my fingers.

Across the cul-de-sac, in front of Chucky's trailer, Ms. Thompson was slid halfway up, and half way down on the ground. Held by Mr. Thompson, who lurched over her, gripping her and pulling her up by her shoulders. It was late at night, the time where the dew is fresh, and the grass is slippery. I figured she slipped, and he caught her. I went back to bed.

"Chris, Ma wants to talk." Jeb, my older brother, shook me by the shoulder. Shook out the clouds driftin' in my head and between my eyes. I dreamt of shining dew on late night grass, sprinkled orange by the streetlights.

"Where she at?" I asked him.

"In the livin' room." He was already strollin' into the hallway. His Power Ranger PJs were fuzzed and staticky from the dryer still.

Our carpet's green. Not green like grass. Green like a dish scrubber. Feels 'bout the same on my feet. It's a hungry kinda carpet. Swallows up chip crumbs and dust mites before the vacuums gotta chance to eat.

Ma was readin' the Bible on the couch. The window I peeped out of last night was drawn back, and the bright sun poured into the room, causing the floating dust in our trailer to glitter like glass in the air.

Dad was still off in Afghan. Killin' people that wanted to kill us. Ma read the Bible a lot more when the towers fell. She patted a seat on the couch, and I sat next to her. Her hugs were warm, her hair smelled like Dollar Tree shampoo.

Jeb sat on the ground and called over Cinnamon, our German Shepherd. She always woke up ma first before waking up the rest of us.

Ma was still huggin' me for some reason. She finally let go and rubbed my shoulder.

"Somethin' happened to Chucky's Ma." Ma said.

I wanted to tell her that I dreamed of dew on the grass last night, that I felt the coolness of it the same way I felt the roughness of the carpet on our floor.

"She was stabbed!" Jeb piped up while rubbin' Cinnamon's soft belly.

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

"Hush Jeb!" Ma used the boom of her army voice. She used to be a tank commander 'till she accidentally had Jeb.

Through the window, three cop cars sat in the front lawn. Some of their lights still flashed. Yellow tape outlined the front lawn like a fence. Two of the cops stood in front of their cars, staring cross armed at the spot exactly where Ms. Thompson was. The others ran around with gloves, papers, and suits. I couldn't see Chucky or his Dad anywhere.

"She was stabbed?" I asked Ma. I couldn't take my eyes off their front lawn. I could still see him hunched over her. Helping her back up from the slippery grass.

"Yeh, he, uh. He stabbed her. Seven times. Left her bleeding on the front lawn." Ma took her glasses off, and set them down on the top of the Bible. I guess she wanted to see outside the window with a blur. Soften the view.

"What's gonna happen to Chucky?" I asked.

"Movin' to his aunts." She whipped around to me, "You don't speak 'bout this to him, you got me?"

I nodded my head.

"I heard Mr. Thompson's gonna fry for it." Jeb scratched Cinnamon behind the ear now, while apathetically lookin' out the window. The dog sneezed and shook her head.

"Let man fry him, God'll sort it from there." Ma put her glasses back on and opened back up the Bible. Peeking over her shoulder, I saw that she was on Leviticus that today.

Starlings squatted and pecked on our front lawn. They pecked the ground like they hated the earth. Sunlight caught their feathers, making them glow rainbows and oil spills. None of them landed on Chucky's lawn.

Chucky's aunt lived in the projects. The projects breathed stomp clap gospel and Old Bay seasoning. Grills hissed with grease, as a drum and bass beat bounced off the cracked and chipped brick buildings. The smells were the strongest. You could walk blind through the projects and find your way home with them.

The Birch family was outback, sizzling a rubbed rib. I waved hi to them all, and they waved back and smiled.

They cooked on the same grill that Mr. Thompson used. He cooked the best dry rub rib, they were always grainy and crisp on top, and juicy when you cracked the skin. We'd wake up to cobwebs filling the food cabinet, and Ma'd tell us not to worry. Mr. Thompson would be cooking that day. He cooked for everybody, his family, my family, the block, the whole projects. He cooked for the stray dogs that wandered by. Brushing soft snouts against his stained jeans, asking for a bite.

We were at one of his barbeques, when I asked him what to do with Charlotte, our old dog dying from bad eyes and worse hips. He would

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

gently speckle brown sauces mixed with spices of plants I can't pronounce. I told him she was dying, Dad was gone, and Ma ain't got the heart or money to help Charlotte on the way out. He said he'd help her. He told me he grew up with a dad that was gone too.

He took Charlotte in his arms and carried her through the woods. A bit of rib was in his pocket for her to eat. He also had a .22 click clack loaded with one round. He told us one round is all you needed. He said she didn't feel a thing, and the last thing she'd remember is the best meal of her life, and a beautiful walk through the woods. He brought her red matching leash and collar back for us.

I wondered why he used one shot on Charlotte, but stabbed Mrs. Thompson seven times. How he cooked for strays and my family, but left Mrs. Thompson to die on wet cold grass.

I knocked on Auntie's door. Several locks clicked open, and the door popped into her house. She smiled bright white teeth at me, her eyes were pink and red though. They looked glossed by tears. She still smiled.

"How you doin', big boy?" She hugged me with thick warm arms. She smelled like the spices that Mr. Thompson used.

"I'm fine. Can Chucky play?"

"He's been in his bed the whole day, if you think you can get him out for a bit, I don't think it'd hurt none." She stepped out the doorway and gestured towards the stairs.

The walls on the inside use to be white, Chucky told me. Now, they were yellow, like sick skin. Cracks and stains painted veins across their surface. I opened Chucky's bedroom door without knocking. He laid face down, drowning in blankets and pillows. DMX spat through his headphones. He wore a wifebeater and gym shorts. It was the same outfit he had on yesterday.

I shook him, and he turned to me. His pillow was wet from sleep drool and tears. He threw the headphones off his head, and paused the CD player.

"You wanna go outside?" I asked him.

"You think you can snatch up some cigs first?" he asked me.

I shrugged my shoulders. It was easier for me to snatch stuff off people. Grownups thought I was too sweet to steal, to be thieving like the thugs from the projects.

"I can swipe some, somewhere." I told him.

I held out my hand, and he stared at it like it was a knife.

"C'mon Chuck." I told him.

He took my hand, and I pulled him out of bed like I was pulling a body out of a river.

You got the projects on the west, and a rock quarry and woods on the east. North of that is Mr. Shaw's horse farm, and a single dirt road that

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

dusts up alongside of it. Mr. Shaw didn't mind none if we hop his fence, walk through the fields, and play with his horses. Chucky didn't want to play with the horses that day though. He said he preferred walkin' through the dirt between the trees. Blindly following the dirt path. I did whatever he wanted, figured it helped.

We were walkin' on the side of the dirt trail, watchin' rusted trucks with fresh fruit in their beds drive by. The sun was too bright. We walked with squinted eyes and wrinkled faces from it.

"You, uh, you like the new DMX?" I asked him. I felt like my voice, gently spoken, broke the silence. Silence filled with rustling leaves in the wind, and the chirping mockingbirds.

Chucky didn't talk. He didn't look at me. For the whole walk, he stared, fuzz eyed, at the winds and bends of the dirt road. Trucks would rumble and rattle past us, blarin' CCR. He didn't turn his head to watch them pass by.

Further down the road, turkey vultures fluttered and bumped over a bumpy mass. Another truck rumbled down the road. Its engine yawned and creaked with metal gears clackin' around in it.

"Do you wanna head back yet? Chuck?" I shook the guy's shoulder. He kept walkin' down the road.

Vultures cluttered like fat feathered flies. Scuttled crab-like over the bump on the side of the road. One peeked its head up, blood was drooling from the bottom of its beak. The rest began to saunter back. They cleared like black parted water.

"What'd you think it'll look like?" Chucky asked me. He whipped a cig out of his pocket and lit it. I wondered if the dead thing in the middle of the road was what he was staring at down the horizon.

"You mean the road kill?" He passed me the cig and I dragged it, long and hard. I tried not to cough, and still did. My lungs sizzled.

"Yeah...watcha think it'll look like?"

Closer up, and all the vultures burst into a storming cloud of feathers. They flew through the air like whistling throw knives. Wings cut wind like a lit blade through soft steak. I stopped to let them pass, but Chucky kept walking. Like a fish swimming through a wave. He walked like he knew them, like he shared a meal with them.

A small red pony laid on its side on the by the road. Its eyes were wide open. Sunlight danced on them - black marble. It would've been bloated if the buzzards didn't pop a hole in its tummy. Several holes were sprouted around it. The white bone of its chest poked through the pink and red mess of torn meat and blood. The poor guy must've hopped the fence, stumbled onto the road at the wrong time.

Another truck rumbled by. The driver honked twice and waved hi at us.

"You okay Chuck?" I asked him as he stumbled back a bit away from the horse. Chuck didn't stare at the horse. He stared at the ropy guts pulled out of the skin, shining pink and new like a baby. He stared at the

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

blocky white bone, peeking out of the skin like mountains rising out from the earth's crust.

"You shouldn't be lookin' at this, man." I tried picking him back up. He was sitting down on the road now, staring at all the pocks and fly filled bumps around its chest and belly.

"Ma was s'pose to read me a story last night." Chuck said.

I gripped his shoulder, and he threw my hand away from him. He clutched his face with taut fists, as if he wanted to keep it from melting and sliding off his bones. His cig burnt next to him. It got picked up and danced off with the wind. The wind hushed us for a good bit. Truck motors hummed beneath the wind's voice, just loud enough to drown out the buzz from the flies.

I went back to bed on the night his mom died.

A rusted red ford rattled down the road with stacks of cabbage and carrots bagged up in the back. Mr. Earl must've been coming back late from the farmer's market. He smiled like Elvis, and greased his hair every morning the same way. He was a barber on the side that dressed like Johnny Cash, always all black. He crunched rocked the truck to a stop and rolled the side window down at us.

"You boys get from that horse! Ain't clean!" he shouted at us.

Chuck didn't budge. I thought he was gonna sit on the earth and let the dirt slowly wash over him, become a sad lonely mummy dug up from the clay. I put a hand on his shoulder again, gripped it tight. I wasn't there for Ms. Thompson, I wanted to be there for Chuck.

"We're fine Mr. Earl." I told him.

"I know your mother's wouldn't want y'all near that..."

"Then goin'n tell them Earl!" I shot back at him.

His face turned as pale as the horse's bone. He probably heard the news 'bout Ms. Thompson from the ladies at the market. He sucked his cheeks in like he wanted to suck back what he said, and rolled up the window instead.

I watched him roll on down the dirt road, spraying red dust into the orange splashed sunset. I whipped my cig out and offered it to Chuck. He wiped dust caked tears from his eyes, and lit it. We spent the afternoon with no words passing between us. Only a lit cig and a dead horse. He gripped my hand tightly, and I held his.