

Wilderness House Literary Review 11/2

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We'll Talk Some More

THE OLD WOMAN TURNED HER HEAD to the window beside her bed and waited for the sun to come up. Her back hurt, but watching the dark gradually turn to light warmed her heart. It reminded her of other sunrises, in countries long forgotten. On snow covered mountains, hot deserts, battlefields, prisons. And the people that were with her, watching the sunrises. Sometimes, when it's very quiet in the nursing home, she'll try to recall some of the places. Some of the people. It is very hard to do. A name will sometimes flash through her mind...and disappear before she can grab it ... put a face with the name. Thank goodness, most days she can remember Charles, and his face. How he would sit in front of their tent and wait for the sun to rise. Or when they sat on the little balcony outside their hotel room in Paris and watched it rise. She turned her head and closed her eyes. *Was it Paris? Or was it London?* Old age can be so cruel, she thought. She slept.

The nurse stood next to the old woman's bed. "How is your back today, Miss Nancy?"

"The same...thank you."

"Some more morphine this morning?"

"Yes, I think so. I will wait as long as I can."

"Good," the nurse said. "Breakfast will be here soon."

"Thank you," the old woman said. *Oh, my God, what we would have given for some morphine. Especially when Charles almost lost his right leg. My dear, dear Charles.*

"Miss Nancy?" an attendant said as she touched the old woman's arm. "Ready for some breakfast?"

"A ... little coffee and a piece of toast would be nice, thank you."

"You got it. I'll be right back."

The coffee was good and the toast had blackberry jam on it. She wondered what day it was. Watching the sun come up, she had thought maybe it was Sunday. A beautiful sunrise on a Sunday morning had always pleased her father. He seemed to deliver powerful sermons on Sunday mornings that started with a lovely sunrise. She knew that he, and her mother, was happy in heaven — if there was a heaven. If so, she knew she would probably not get to see them. Unless of course, God was a very forgiving God.

The old woman slept most of the morning. The morphine eased her pain considerably. When she woke they sat her up in bed, as best they could without hurting her back. She could see out the window much better sitting up in bed. The leaves were turning, and in the distance she could make out the tops of mountains. Once, she had asked the nurse if the mountains were the Alps. The nurse had laughed and said, "Miss Nancy, we're in Georgia — in the United States." That had embarrassed the old woman. Ever since that day, she'd made a point of thinking on

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things before blurting out questions and comments. It was hard; she struggled with it every day. The older I get, the harder it is to make sense out of things, she thought. She stared at the mountains and smiled.

In her mind, Charles led the way up the trail. He was strong and so encouraging to everyone. The rifles were heavy, but the men carrying the mortars had it the hardest. Charles knew this time the Gestapo would not follow long. Climbing the mountain would be too much strain on their big bellies, still full of pheasant and French wine. Lots of wine. At the first rock outcrop, Charles dispersed everyone. Their positions looking down on the trail were perfect. Everyone was quiet. Charles gave the signal. It was terrible for the Germans. They were killed quickly. Papers were taken from their pockets and Charles led us, deeper into the mountains. The old woman looked at her hands and fingers. They were blue from blood thinners. Her arms, too. They were once good-looking hands. Strong. How many Germans had they killed? She used to know — twenty, or two hundred — she'd forgotten.

The nurse came back and sat in a chair beside her bed. "Would you like to talk?" she asked the old woman.

"Yes. That would be nice."

"What," said the nurse, "would you like to discuss?"

The old woman said, "I would like to discuss my death."

"Miss Nancy! We don't need to do that."

"I want to," the old woman insisted.

"It...it's gonna happen to all of us. That's true. But—"

"Listen dear. I'm not afraid of dying. I believe it's one of two things. You either go to sleep, and that's all. Nothing else happens. Or, you go to some eternal place and live another life—live for eternity,"

"That's what I believe. For sure. I'm going to heaven," the nurse said.

"I'm not sure where I'll go, even if the second option exists."

"Miss Nancy. You've lived a good life, haven't you?"

The old woman turned and looked out the window. "When were you born?" she asked the nurse.

"Nineteen forty-two," she answered. "I *know* when you were born."

"You do?"

"Oh, yes. It's on your chart."

"I guess it's got all kinds of good stuff about me," the old woman said.

The nurse shook her head and laughed. "Not much really."

"Where does it say I live?"

"Here. You have a farmhouse in the country."

"Habersham County?"

"Yes. That's right," the nurse said.

"Does it say where I lived before?"

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"No. Only here. Where *did* you live before?"

"I moved here, to my daddy and mother's house, from Virginia."

"Virginia? Oh, that's a pretty state," the nurse said. "Did you work, or keep house in Virginia?"

"I worked ... for the government."

"I'll bet you had a good job, didn't you?" the nurse said as she straightened the old woman's pillow. "I need to check on some other folks, Miss Nancy. I'll be back later and we'll talk some more."

The old woman raised her hand, and said, "Next time, we'll talk about my death. Okay?"

The nurse held her hand for a moment. "Of course. If that's what you want."

The old woman closed her eyes.

1942! October. Took me right out of the Foreign Office. A chance to make a difference—to help defeat Nazism, Charles had said. Exciting, overseas, but dangerous. He was so right. The first drop into France, at night in the dead of winter. Operating the radio. Meeting with the free French.

The old woman awoke and smelled urine. It seemed to always be in the air. The odor reminded her of Paul Lefore, on the day she was changing the bandage on his thigh, and his bladder suddenly emptied, on her hands. She smiled to herself. Little Paul had been so embarrassed. He died three days later, in a farmhouse near Saint-Lo, she remembered. Two attendants came in her room and changed the bed sheets. They were careful when they moved the old woman from side to side. Her doctor, Hugh Garrison, had explained to all the nurses and attendants the importance of being very careful. "One wrong move," he had told them, "could paralyze her."

Hugh Garrison was old, too. He had grown up in Habersham County, just like the old woman. She was a couple of years older than him, but he remembered her — particularly her athletic ability. She had been a great basketball player in high school. Now she was almost an invalid. He was one of the first people she had called on when she moved back. "I always planned to come back home and die, Hugh," she had told him. He'd silently wished she had come back years before. Her body was in bad shape, and he had watched her go rapidly downhill.

Later the nurse came back. "When the time comes, if I'm still in here," she said to the nurse, "and not in the hospital, I want you to keep me loaded up on morphine. Okay"

"Well, Miss Nancy, we'll do ever —"

"Listen, honey, I know Hugh has given you certain orders, but, when I...I get to the end, don't try to keep me."

"I know. I will do my best —"

"Thank you," the old woman said.

"Have you been around many folks as they died, Miss Nancy?"

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The old woman closed her eyes. "Yes dear. A few."

A few. Oh, Lord. How many? Suddenly in her mind, she saw General Patton in a hospital bed with a strange contraption connected to his head. He said, "I will always remember your great work at the Falaise Pocket. Your intelligence saved many American soldiers. I am personally indebted to you, and to the French resistance." One week later, we got the news that he had died. Everyone was terribly sad.

"Heidelberg," the old woman said.

"What?" the nurse asked. "Hidle-bug?"

"Yes, yes. That's the town...where the hospital was...where General Patton died."

"What? You mean the war with the Germans? World War Two?"

"Yes," the old woman said. "I was...there...."

"You were...you fought in the war?"

"Yes. But, that was after the war was over. Charles and I stayed in Germany for several months."

The nurse stood up and gently patted the old woman's arm. "I need to go now, Miss Nancy. Got to do my rounds."

"Come back, we'll talk some more, if you'd like."

"I will."

She closed her eyes, put her fingers together, and visualized Charles's face. She placed her left hand on his cheek. With her right hand she felt his eyes, then his nose, and finally his lips. She moved her fingers again and again, touching his ears, cheeks, eyes, nose and lips. She could see him plainly. It was like a photograph. He was real to her. She moved both hands closer and laid his head upon her chest.