

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

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Death on the Telephone

I was sitting on the couch with my dog, watching a movie and drinking vodka out of a plastic bottle, when Death called to let me know he'd finished his affair with my sister.

My dog doesn't drink. Something to do with an autoimmune disorder. His white blood cells are too busy wrecking his knee cartilage to handle a couple liquidized fermented potatoes.

Alcohol isn't as immediate as it first seems. Sure, the buzz is pretty quick, and the taste is instant. But that hangover is a long time coming. Consider fermentation. Consider distillation. Consider bottling and shipping. Consider wholesalers and retailers. Consider the thousands of years of refinement since that first hairy ape man suckled on an old soured grape and discovered Dionysus. Yeah, that hangover has been a long time coming.

My point is not all emotion happens immediately. Some canvasses you have to ship halfway across the world to find the right landscape. Some stories you have to let go stale in a covered pot a couple months to congeal into something readable.

That's how it was with my sister's death—a long time coming.

The first thing I said when I put the phone down was, "Typical."

Mort, my dog, barked as if asking, "What was that about, bro?"

"Well," I said. It really was typical. It was just like Caetlin to interrupt a decent action flick. Right in the middle of the big car chase, too. Tires are screeching, cars are flipping, sirens are blaring, and then there comes Caetlin on the telephone. Typical. "It's something I'll deal with later."

I hit play and the tires screeched, and the cars flipped, and the sirens blared. And a woman with auburn hair and a lazy eye flip-flop-somersaulted across the road, kickboxing mobsters and breakdancing on windshields. She gave a chunky-monkey muscle-man the old Right there, Fred and screamed, "Give him back!"

'Him' in this situation was her brother, who'd been kidnapped by the nefarious New World Order mafia, and the breakdancing and Right there, Freds were supposed to get him back somehow.

Eventually, the movie starts to hint that something's not right with the whole situation. Either she never had a brother, or he never loved her, or he wasn't kidnapped at all.

Things were just starting to get weird when Death made his courtesy call.

A long time coming, it sure was. No immediacy here. Caetlin began her flirtation with Death at a young age.

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She was only in grade school when one day, while the rest of us threw rocks at each other in our gravel driveway, she sauntered by with a bottle of bleach in one hand, a can of motor oil in the other, and a pair of jelly jars strapped to her face for goggles. We all thought she was clever, that maybe she'd be an engineer someday. We were all pretty amused with her until she blew up the dog.

Peachy was a good dog. He was a border collie, black and white fur, playful. He loved to run, could run for hours, and loyal. He kept a close eye on any of the smaller kids when they wandered away from home, the bigger kids too. Yeah, Peachy was a real good dog. Then Caetlin rocketed his insides up and down the kitchen wall.

The worst part was that Caetlin didn't even care. While we mourned, she raided the cabinet underneath the sink for more bleach.

Sometimes, I think Death was around all along, watching her, his infatuation taking root, sprouting, blood-bursting. In a lot of our old family photos, especially ones of Caetlin, there's this shadowy blur in the corner. In some you can just make out the figure of a man in the woods, just off to the side or in the background. But whatever.

There was the lumberjack phase, too. God only knows where Caetlin found the hatchet. She was something like twelve years old when she started putting on overalls, eating pancakes for breakfast every morning, and marching out into the woods with her hatchet. She'd hack away at tree bark for a couple hours, and we'd sit around and laugh about it.

But one afternoon we hear Caetlin yell, "Timber!" and then there's this crackling, cackling, carrumping sound, and then there's a tree lying on our roof.

The tree busted the roof pretty good. Mom and dad never had the money to fix it right. There were a lot of cold winters and wet rainy nights after that.

I think it was around then that everyone started getting sick of Caetlin. I'd been through with her for a long time, but I think it was after the roof that we, as a collective, decided we didn't want much to do with her anymore.

After I told Mort what the phone call was about, he put a paw on the remote and the auburn haired girl with the lazy eye froze mid-strut-twirl rightways-back.

"What'd you stop the movie for?" I asked, and tipped up my plastic bottle.

He glanced at me as if saying, "Your sister, bro."

And I told him, "Turn the movie back on."

"But about your sister," his dopey eyes said.

"How about the movie," I said.

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On the screen, the girl with auburn hair and the lazy eye got blown over and knocked upside the head by a thug with an arm like a pickup truck. She fell to the ground, finally broken, mafia thugs all around. It was dark and cold, and she was shivering all over. She whispered her brother's name.

I felt weird about that movie. I couldn't stop watching. I don't know if I ever blinked. She was fighting so hard to get back to him, and I was just sitting on the couch.

I have ten siblings. Most people when I tell them that, they say, "God bless your parents."

Yeah, well, my parents aren't the only ones who need your blessings.

I was the fourth oldest. Caetlin was the third oldest. It was a garbage position to be in.

One time, she dragged me into her room, back when we could have our own rooms, and locked the door. She pulled open her bureau and started yanking out all kinds of frilly pink things and throwing them at me. She dressed me up like a ballerina, made me put on her toutou, wrapped a feathery scarf tight around my neck. She told me to dance.

And I danced. There I was, a little crossdressing freak, bawling my eyes out, and her waving a baton in my face and screaming, "Left kick, high strut! Pop it! Hold that pose, and hold that pose, hold it! Now twirl rightways back!"

After she broke the roof, we didn't bother with Caetlin. We told her she could do whatever she wanted, so long as she did it far away from us and the house. She complied, mostly, and we didn't see her much after that. She would go out into the woods for hours, sometimes days at a time, and we didn't ask what she'd been doing.

When she was around fifteen, we spotted her sitting with a man out by the creek. Kids are born with some innate knowledge of Death, so we knew who the man was right away. Caetlin must have known too.

We saw them together a few other times, painting their faces with crushed beetle guts, hanging roasted deer entrails from tree branches, digging up graves and arranging desiccated corpses in nightmarish constellations. Typical teenager puppy dog first love type stuff.

We didn't care. We never worried. We never warned her. We never asked.

On her eighteenth birthday, Caetlin was out of there. I did the same thing later on. I left too.

The difference between our exits was that on my eighteenth birthday Death didn't drive up to our front door in a hearse, and I didn't leap into his cold embrace and kiss him on a bony cheek, and I didn't sit down in

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his passenger seat and wave goodbye while the Grim Reaper drove me far out of reach.

“He’s gonna put me in movies,” she said. “Can you believe it?”

All I did was get away from all the bullshit. It wasn’t as if I didn’t like my family. I liked most of them okay. You just gotta get away from a situation like that or you’ll go crazy. Too many voices.

So that’s what I did. I got away. I found an apartment, adopted a dog named Mort, boarded myself up inside, and told everybody to shove off. Nobody bothered me until Death’s call.

You see? There was no immediacy in Caetlin’s death. It was a long, long time coming. We all knew from the moment we saw those two lying belly-down in the center of their corpse constellation, the crimson blush on her cheek, the charming smile on his face.

There was no reason to be surprised when Death’s call came that night.

Caetlin, I think, I mean I know, I mean she must have known. How could she not?

We never asked her. We never talked to her about it. But how could she not have known what he was?

Whatever. It doesn’t matter now.

On the screen, the girl with the auburn hair and the lazy eye lies on the concrete floor of a mafia prison, belly-down, dried blood blush on her cheek. She’s gonna be executed soon. She looks into the camera. She looks at no one. She looks at me. She talks regrets with no one. She talks regrets with me.

Lazy eye says she’s only got one regret. She says, “I just wish I could tell him that I’m sorry.”

Family is such a weird thing. You grow up with these people, these total strangers. You’ve got nothing in common except that you’re sharing your lives together. You’ve got nothing in common except you know more about each other than anybody else ever will. For a long time, they are your life. They’re the most important thing. They’re in every scene.

And then they’re not anymore.

Things fall apart, yeah? Entropy and such. Families as much as everything else.

The phone call:

Death: I have some horrible, just terrible, just tragic news. It’s about your sister.

Me: Whosits and whatsits?

Death: She asked about you. She wanted to know where you were. I

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didn't have any answer for the poor old hag. She shriveled up like an oily dried fig at the end. Can you believe it? She'd been so beautiful once.

Me: ...

Death: Where were you?

Me: ...

Death: I gave her everything she ever asked for. What did you give her?

Me: I was out of town.

Death: You never came, not even once. Oh, how she must have felt. Did anyone ever love her but me?

Me: I just said I was out of town.

Death: Enjoy the movie. It's got a hell of an ending, a real white knuckler, tie your stomach in knots, hold onto your seatbelt sort of shootout. It's one of my favorites, just for that last blowout. What an ending!

Me: Uh huh.

Death: See you soon.

I got arrested once. Nothing exciting, just some disorderly conduct. I'm in the drunk tank and I call my friends, and they tell me exactly where I can shove my apologies. I fell asleep thinking no one was coming for me.

And then Caetlin bailed me out.

I have no idea how she knew where I was. I hadn't seen or talked to her in years. But there she was. Because we were family.

She took me to one of those twenty-four hour breakfast joints, and we sat down in a booth together. Death hung back, stayed in the car. I saw him lurking there behind her, like a vulture hovering over a thirsty man in the desert, but I didn't mention anything about it.

I shoveled strawberry pancakes into my mouth, and Caetlin smiled at me. She looked about the same as I remembered, except a few wrinkles in her smile that hadn't been there before. She seemed happy enough. Besides Death hanging out over there, I didn't have any serious reason to worry about her. I'm not the bad guy here, you know. She looked fine to me.

While I ate, Caetlin asked, "How are mom and dad?"

"I haven't seen them in a while," I said.

"What about everyone else?"

I squelch-squirted syrup on my pancakes. "Your guess is as good as mine."

She looked disappointed, then smiled again. "And how are you?"

With a mouthful of food I said, "I feel like garbage."

"I'm sorry," she said.

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"For what?"

She shrugged.

I ate my pancakes.

"I meant generally," she said. "How are you doing in general?"

"You know," I said.

She picked up a fork and tap-tapped it on the table. "I really don't, but I'd like to."

I chewed and thought. "I'm about the same as ever, I guess."

"Do you still paint?" she asked.

"Sometimes," I said.

"That's awesome." She smiled, looked genuinely happy to hear about it. "Have you sold anything?"

"I've shopped some stuff around." I bit down on something hard and spit it out onto my plate. Looked like a beetle, but I don't know.

"I know that someday you're going to be one of the greats," she said, and reached out and touched my hand. "Remember me when you're famous."

"Yeah, well," I said. "Thanks."

We hugged goodbye soon after that. She went back to Death and I went back to my apartment. I never saw her again.

And then here's this girl on the screen diving headfirst into a hurricane to look for a brother who probably isn't there, who probably doesn't even care. Did anyone ever love her but Death? I guess not.

I think when some kind of trauma happens, or you get really awful news, or whatever, I think that it's not immediate. Emotionally, I mean. Rationally you can figure it all out pretty quick, but your brain takes a while to figure out how it's supposed to feel. It's a sort of grace period, a calm before the storm.

Well, I was in that calm while I watched that stupid movie after Death hung up. In that calm, I thought about five things:

1. Did I leave the refrigerator open?
2. What an idiot that girl on the screen was.
3. How easy it would have been for Caetlin to not come to the jail at all. How easy it would have been for her to never know or care. How easy it would have been for her to know and care but not do anything about it.
4. But she did do something.
5. How easy it would have been for me to reach out and grab Caetlin's arm and say, No. How easy it would have been for me to pull her back.
6. I didn't do anything.
7. What a stupid kind of hero that girl on the screen was.

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And then there was this one time, when we were really little, and Caetlin and me were the only ones home. This terrible storm struck. Freak winds, clouds swirling menacingly above, threatening wisps getting low to the ground. I don't know if there'd ever been a tornado anywhere near our house, but when I was little tornadoes terrified me for whatever reason.

Anyway, Caetlin, she ran out into the driveway. She stuck out her arms and spun in circles. She yelled to me, "I'm getting sucked into the tornado. I'm getting blown away. Help, oh help me. I'm getting blown away."

I stood in the doorway and pleaded with her, "Please come back. Please stop. Please come back. Please, please, please."

She spun and spun and spun and jumped up into the air, auburn hair in a ponytail twirling like a helicopter propeller, lazy eye looking off to the side like it had somewhere better to be.

She jumped into the air, and I screamed, lost my mind, peed my pants, wept bitter crazed tears.

She laughed at me so hard she fell on the ground gasping for breath.

As far as I'm concerned, she's been dead ever since. She got sucked up by a tornado and tossed from cloud-to-cloud like a booger in an arcade pinball table and thrown two counties over.

At the end of the movie, the girl with auburn hair and the lazy eye is lying on the cell floor waiting to die. She falls asleep thinking no one is coming for her and she's not going anywhere.

The cell door rattles open, and there's her brother.

He says, "Sorry, sis, but you've just had a stay of execution."

They fight their way out. They fight against prison guards, against mobsters, against tornadoes, against talking dogs, against alcohol abuse, against family drama, against death itself. They fight together and they make it out alive.

Then they eat pancakes in a little twenty-four hour breakfast joint and talk about old times. Death hangs back, a hundred years away.

After the movie, I threw up and passed out. When I woke up, my dog was licking vomit off my face and Caetlin was still gone. The hangover finally hit me. It was a long time coming.