

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/2

*Charles Hayes*

### **Friends: One Down, One Arrested (Before All Things Must Pass)**

**S**tanding on a large rock and turning my face to the soft light filtering through the treetops, I pray, asking for forgiveness and that my body be found before it rots. After checking the tautness a final time, I pull the noose over my head and tighten the knot behind my left ear. I do things right. Better than any note left behind to sweep my exit. This will be clear to anyone who cares to see. Lowering my eyes to the space that I intend to fill, my vision is taken up with a small sign of life in the creek below. On the bottom is a crawdad holding a small earthworm. Like a fan holds aloft a caught baseball, the crawdad seems to be showing the world that it can make it. Seeing this microcosm of life so clearly from my perch, as if somehow it is magically magnified for me, I change my mind. Sliding the knot loose with trembling hands, I lift the rope from my neck, climb down from the rock, and trudge out of the woods to my small home along the dirt road. My mind is swirling with thoughts of my fleeing wife and stepkids.



Barbara Stephens, known simply as Babs, shackled up with Ben Hoons, the father of her two kids, until he left them for his younger cousin and their kid. Not one to miss such a rare opportunity, I caught Bab's bounce perfectly and we were quickly married.

Hearing that his old family had made a new home with me, like a child that has thrown away his toys, Ben Hoons wanted them back. So he drove up the hollow to try to do that. But when he got to the little footbridge across the creek to my shack, I was waiting.

"Get out of my way," Ben said, as he swung and tried to push past my stiff arm.

Dodging and countering with two quick blows I knocked him down and gave him a choice.

"Let it go. Just go on and get off my property or I'll get the law up here."

His eye starting to puff up, Ben struggled to his feet, got back into his pick-up and, while cursing and waving a tire iron out the window, spun up a cloud of dust going away. This problem was eventually ironed out by a judge and a poor people's lawyer. Their ruling gave me, after many years of being alone, a bona fide wife with some step kids to boot. But with family came responsibilities. Having been told by Babs that if I ever started drinking again she and the kids would leave me, I picked up the bottle a few months on anyway. And it was like Babs had just been waiting for the opportunity. Looking out the window one day, I saw my family, with their packed trash bags, walking across the footbridge, down the road, and out of my life.



Jay Handley, my squad leader in Vietnam, was a kind of easy going guy but with a bit of an insensitive streak. Once, patrolling out of a fire-

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base near Hue, we located the charred bodies of a local Viet Cong cadre that had been caught in the open and napalmed. Stinking terribly to everyone else, the blackened mounds of flesh didn't bother Handley. Grabbing one of the dead, propping him up against a palm tree, and shoving a cigarette in his mouth, Handley started talking to the charred mass as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The lieutenant really chewed him out but Handley just stood there smiling and leaning against that same palm tree like he was hanging on the street corner. When the lieutenant walked away Handley booted the corpse back to the ground and, to my amazement, just winked and giggled before getting very serious.

"The lieutenant's got no guts," he said, "he's not going to make it."

Two months later the lieutenant stepped on a booby trapped 155 shell. It blew him 50 feet into the air and when he came down it was in three big pieces with lots of little pieces missing. Handley gathered the pieces for the chopper to lift out, saying over and over, "I knew it!"



Sitting on the outhouse toilet with the door open, watching the sun edge closer to the far western ridges, I cup my chin in my hands and wonder what day it is. Almost mesmerized by the incessant drone of the locusts, I startle when I hear an old familiar voice.

"Still sitting on the can while the world passes you by, huh Hayes?"

As out of left field as it gets, the voice brings me to focus on Jay Handley walking across the outer edge of the property.

"I thought as much," Jay continues. "I hope you're doing better than you look."

Cutting short my session and quickly pulling up my pants, I come out of the outhouse smiling, my hand outstretched. Grabbing my wrist and inspecting my hand before shaking it, Jay lets out that booming laugh of times in that other world.

"What the hell are you doing in these parts?" I say. "Thought you were back in some factory up in Sandusky."

"Not me, can't take some labor boss telling me what to do any better than you can Hayes. While I had an old lady maybe, but now, she's gone, what's the point?"

Laughing and feeling good for the first time in weeks, I shake my head.

"You mean to tell me that you actually found some woman that would put up with you. I don't believe it, you got to be lying."

Jay looks around at the shack, outhouse, and little patch of land between the road and the woods.

"Well it don't appear to me that you're doing much better. I don't see any of the fairer sex pinning up your laundry."

Suddenly remembering Babs and my step kids, I lose my grip on the bravado and fall silent. Noticing the quick pain in my eyes, Jay well remembers that look and how it was overseas. He would slap my shoulder and say, "Fuck it, it don't mean nothin." It was our mantra of pain and a

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way to try and arrest it. Make it stop. However Jay decides best he just let it die naturally this time. After a short pause, finally meeting each other's eyes, Jay simply nods and says, "We waiting for the guide to this mansion or can we make it inside alone?"

I laugh and playfully push him.

"Still the mood man, huh? Got a problem? Take it to Handley. Get in the door there and mind you wipe your feet first."

A small wood burner, an old rocker, and a sofa, worn through to its pasteboard, make up the living room furnishings. But it is enough. Being of like ilk, we know that there are no revelations about our lives to put forward. No 'catching up' to do. Just simply relaxing into some plain talk and firing up a couple of sticks of home grown brings us two friends back home a bit. It is fine. Even if one foot remains where we were, we are not alone.

"Don't you ever get the feeling that you're trapped up this hollow, miles from the nearest town, no transportation?" Jay ask. "I don't think I'd be able to take that for very long."

"I get into town some," I say, "stir things up a little bit, then retire back here until things calm down. Besides there ain't no liquor stores around here so I'm forced out every now and then."

Jay laughs.

"Yeah I can see that, sure looks like some kind of solitary up here. Don't expect people can get in your shit much out this way. I could use a couple of weeks of that about now. Might help me draw out where I'm heading, if anything can."

"Hell, man," I say, "throw your gear in that extra room there. It's where my stepkids used to stay. Don't expect that they'll mind now."

Before Jay can respond, I suddenly jump up and say, "It's where I keep my guns. Come on, have a look."

Following me past the curtain and into the room, Jay sees a couple of Army cots with the mattresses rolled up, torn flowery wallpaper that looks 50 years old, and some indoor/outdoor carpet over most of the rough cut flooring. No furniture but between a couple of windows facing the outhouse and the steep woods beyond, a large gun rack is mounted. Several rifles and shotguns occupy it. Each gun shows not a flaw nor a speck of corrosion. And the stocks glow with rubbed-in linseed oil like the day they were fashioned. Jay, smiling like a Cheshire, walks over to the rack and admires an old Stevens 12 gauge as he lifts it from the rack.

"Man, this one goes back a ways. I got my first squirrel with one of these."

"So did I. "Check out that Model 12 Winchester. Smoothest action I ever seen."

Returning the Stevens and lifting the Model 12 free, Jay studies it a moment, then lifts it to his shoulder for a fit. Bringing it back down, he softly whistles and returns it to the rack.

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"Man, Hayes, you got guns here worth more than this house."

"Like em, don't you Jay? Take your pick. We'll go after squirrel tomorrow."

"I'll take the Model 12 if you can spare it," Jay says. "What will you use though?"

"The 22 automatic," I say. "It's always what I use. Gives the critter a sporting chance."

Slapping his thigh, Jay laughs.

"That's right! Dead eye Hayes! I bet you still don't miss."

A little flattered by my old squad leader's praise, I walk over to the rack and lovingly stroke the scoped 22 before replying.

"Sometimes, Jay.....on purpose."



Hunting the hills together, not bringing in much game, but in a way reliving a part of our past, we quietly roam the hardwood forest and carry the guns that we love. Making one trip into town during that time, we use the last of Jay's money for all the liquor we will need and some good food to cook up when we want. We even manage to complete a one-day roofing job for an old widow that lives nearby, asking only that she provide the materials. Finishing that job, sunburned and sweating alcohol, we amuse the widow with our discomfort. She tells us that it's good for us and that it will remove a little of our barroom pallor. Laughing about it and realizing that it is her way of feeling like she is giving us something since she has no money, we tell her that she is probably right. Then packing it in, we head for the river to bathe.



Sitting and sipping our last bottle of Wild Turkey on the river rocks after our bath, not much passes between us. Out in the calm water, beyond the rocks, the loud pop of a beaver tail brings our heads up to see a setting sun. Quietly, we put our clothes on, noticing the look in each other's eyes. Knowing that the other is back at one of those streams in the Nam where we had bathed together, we silently leave the waters and go back up the hollow to our home.



Heavy rain pounding the tin roof, adding a small sense of security, brings us to in the wee hours of the morning. Finding the last two cans of beer in the fridge, I give one to Jay and, with unsteady hands, roll up and light a joint.

"Well, that's the end of the booze. Think we should scratch up some money and get some more?"

"No need to bother," Jay replies, "time for me to hit the road again anyway. Catching and keeping rides is hard when the bottle goes along."

Speaking in a slow quiet way that reminds me of some of our conversations on night watch back in the war, Jay floats an idea.

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"Say Charlie, why don't you come with me? There ain't nothing holding you here. I figure on heading out to Seattle, try to get on some fishing trawler for a spell. You know, sock up a little money, then see what's happening."

"You mean hitchhike?" I say. "I guess you know rides are hard to come by these days, especially for two grown men."

"You got a better idea?"

"Maybe. Did you see that old VW setting under the tarp in the widow's yard?"

Jay nods.

"Well, it's been setting like that for two years that I know of. Parts are cheap, plus there's an authorized dealer and parts store in town. The old woman liked our work. Maybe we could work some sort of deal with her, fix up that old house for the VW, and have some wheels to get around."

Jay studies the proposition for a moment then shakes his head.

"Where are we going to get the money for gas? Food will cost plenty and you do want to let down every now and then, don't you? Seems like it would just be another trapping to eat up resources, stifle what little freedom we got."

Nodding in silence for several moments, I decide to let it out.

"I got some money squirreled away that my mom left me. Not a lot but enough to get the VW going and get us out West. Don't know why I was saving it, just felt like it wasn't really my money. Might as well put it to some use."

Jay looks to the ceiling and rolls his eyes.

"You old sandbagging asshole you! Living up here hand to mouth and you got money in the bank! Hell yes, we can put that money to use."

Getting a deal with the widow woman, who is glad to give us a shove off, we two aging Namies paint her house, rebuild the old porch, and repair her falling down barn. Happy with our work, the old woman deeds the VW, and wishes us luck, telling us that we are too young to be idling away our time up a West Virginia hollow. After several trips hitchhiking to town and the local junk yards, we get the old car licensed and in good running shape. Time to hit the road. Loading the old bug up with our gear and locking the shack tight with the guns in a concealed wall compartment, we get ready to make our final trip out of the hollow. But as Jay starts to get behind the wheel, I stop him.

"Hold tight a bit Jay, there's something I need to do first, down the creek a little ways, back in the woods there. Come on, there's something you've never seen. And I can't just leave it like that."

Coming upon the little space beside a small feeder stream to the main creek, we find the noose hanging from an old Elm limb, just as I had left it. Staring up at it for what seems like a long time, we are lost. Finally, Jay looks away, shakes his head, and says in a choked whisper, "Fuck it, it don't mean nothing."

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"No doubt about it," I reply. "It don't mean nothing! Now let's get this rope to tie down some of our stuff."

Lashing on the top of the VW all that will not fit inside and under the hood, we celebrate the death of the gallows, cracking jokes and laughing about it all. New beginnings are ahead.



Out of West Virginia, across Ohio, and almost all the way to Chicago that first day, we stop in a little roadside campground and spend the night before pushing on through the corn belt the next day. Passing through the broad expanses of the West and topping the continental divide, followed by crossing the Cascades, we finally come down into Western Washington and Seattle's port by Puget Sound. Boats and ships are scattered about everywhere on the many huge waterways. Locating the fishing fleet base and its myriad of ships is easy. After getting our applications in for the next Bering Sea run up around Alaska, we luckily find a place to stay at a boarding home for fishermen and Alaska cannery workers waiting for the season.

Quickly called back for interviews after killing time around the waterfront and tourist spots, we are hired on one of the first trawlers to head North.



Having a record of good loads, a good galley, and adequate berthing, the Edson spends the first several weeks doing pretty standard fishing. Working the nets topside, Jay, who is bigger, ribs me about my easier job below in the small processing unit. But we both know that topside is much more dangerous. And that is why it pays more and comes with life insurance.

As the season changes and the sun disappears for longer and longer periods, rough seas turn dangerous. One night, removing his safety line in order to work the nets faster, Jay is washed overboard by a rogue wave that almost capsizes the vessel. Taken down immediately by his heavy gear, Jay's chances of being found are nil. After a cursory search for him, the Edson must make for the Alaska shore with many hands injured.

Having been thrown across the relay belt and knocked unconscious by the door hatch, my right arm is broken. I have also sustained some serious cuts and lacerations that make it necessary to send me back to Seattle. The fleet takes care of my medical and living expenses.

Healing quickly, I soon find myself back on the streets of the City. Only this time I am alone. The beneficiary of Jay's small life insurance policy and a small workman's comp payment, I receive enough money to get on with my life but one thing's for sure. I am done with fishing. And while Seattle is nice with its moderate climate and generous people, it is still foreign to me. Seeing raccoons wander the streets at night, I feel like a fragile Alice and almost wonder when the big rabbit will appear. It's all just not me, whatever that is. I don't have much but what I do have lies back East in the Appalachians. It's where I should be.

Having sold the VW before going to sea, I fly to Sandusky to look up

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Jay's family and give them the money from the life insurance. In good conscious, I can't keep it. Jay's folks look like they can use it and I, also hurting from the loss of my friend, find a little peace in getting it to them. Treating me warmly, they bring out some of the pictures that Jay took in the Nam and show me some of the ones that I am in. Studying and re-studying those photographs for a whole afternoon, I remember the time and those who didn't make it and try to put some kind of order to it all. The Handleys let me be during that last afternoon. And I seem to gain the purchase that I have been scabbling for ever since that tragic night on the Bering Sea. And even before.

Saying goodbye to Jay's family the next morning and catching a bus down to the Southern Appalachians of West Virginia, I return to Fox Run and my little place there. In a way I am glad to be back. Maybe I should never have left. Maybe I never will again.

Sitting by the cold wood stove, I bend over and unlatche the snaps on my suitcase. Lying atop my few clothes is that old rope that went the distance with me and Jay. And then with me alone. Hefting it, I let it part way uncurl to the floor and begin slowly counting the loops of the noose as I make it. Stopping before I get to thirteen, I just sit there looking down at the rope in my hands, feeling its coarseness and remembering the burns I used to get from an old childhood rope swing. Sitting most of the night holding that rope, dropping it and picking it up, smiling sometimes, and almost crying others, I look back.

Coming cold and grey, the February morning light slants through the window and into my senses. A fresh blanket of snow has fallen. Suddenly a little Black Capped Chickadee alights on the snow covered window sill. Fluffing and flapping around in the snow, as if bathing for an important event, it burst loose with a song that breaks the morning silence. Just as suddenly the bird fluffs again and is gone. Standing and dropping the rope back into the suitcase, I snap it shut and put it aside. Moving to the window, I look out over the meadow to the perch halfway up the hillside beyond. Up where Jay and I sat after a still hunt and talked life. Covered by white powder, it seems cold and remote compared to my warm recall. Moments pass and its chill remains, so dissimilar to my memory. Grudgingly, I spin from the view, grab an ax and head to the wood pile, telling myself with every step, "Fuck it, it don't mean nothing."