

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/4

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Superhighway

I'm assigned to a county road crew picking up trash along the interstate highway wearing an orange vest and helmet. There are four of us on the crew who live in half-way homes and required to work until our probation periods expire. The crew consists of an obese, single, middle aged Caucasian woman named Fanny convicted of welfare fraud for collecting benefits from three social security numbers to support the horde of rescue dogs she loved. Her orange vest barely fits around her rotund body. She shares the sugar cookies she carries providing us with a needed surge of energy getting us through the day. Lopez is a slightly built Mexican immigrant who was convicted of workers comp fraud. When his knees gave out working as a laborer for a construction company, he was awarded workers compensation benefits. He mowed lawns and climbed ladders cleaning rain gutters to support his pregnant wife and three children before the insurance investigator caught him working and pressed charges. Jackson is a tall, lanky, chain smoking Black man in his seventies who fancies himself as a "Mack" and entertains us about his glory days of wearing full length mink coats, driving his custom Cadillac, wearing gold jewelry, and enjoying a stable of girlfriends. He was convicted of check fraud which supported the grandchildren of several of his former girlfriends. I was assigned the position of "siren blower" requiring me to face the crew and oncoming traffic sounding the warning siren if danger approached allowing the crew to seek safety.

Our boss is Deputy Horace who drives the orange county van which tows a trailer including our portable plastic toilet. He is tough. Regulations require we get a one hour lunch and two 15 minutes breaks but Horace only gives us a half hour to eat the unappetizing County provided sack lunch. The smug Deputy is nearing retirement and never leaves the van with the air conditioning roaring. He loves the Rolling Stones. The volume is so loud I can hear the lyrics despite his windows being closed. He plays video games and eats greasy burgers, chips, and gulps down discount store brand cola. The five gallon water jug provided for our hydration is empty by noon and Horace refuses to fill it. Each crew member is responsible for filling a minimum of ten orange trash bags and cleaning ten miles of highway in ten hours. The only time we hear from Horace is when the van's loud speaker barks,

"Pick up the pace or I'll keep you out all night with two demerits each!"

Anybody accumulating ten demerits violates their parole and is sent back to prison. Working in the darkness is treacherous as were only visible by our orange vests and a single flashing amber warning light atop the van.

We're often the recipients of cruel remarks shouted as drivers speed by, "You got what you deserve, Losers!"

What did I deserve, I wonder? The sun is beating down, the payment is scorched, and I'm drenched in sweat inhaling the noxious exhaust fumes. I have a headache, feel nauseous, and I'm angry that life dealt me a "bad

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hand". I know as the day progresses, obese Fanny will be unable to keep up the pace, Lopez's blown knees, and Jackson's chronic smokers cough will also slow us down requiring us to work late into the night with the possibility of demerits. I won't go back to prison. I may dash into traffic and end my misery but I'd rather wait for the opportunity to kill myself taking Deputy Horace with me. The Stone's lyrics resound from the van, "I look inside myself and see my heart is black"

The trash we pick up along the highway symbolizes lives gone hay-wire. Most of it is cans, bottles, fast food packaging, and condoms but today we found a weathered photo album and a baby doll. The photo album depicted a happy family I envied and wondered what had befallen them. I spied a used hypodermic needle which reminded me of my mom who died of a heroin overdose while I was in prison.

I grew up in the high desert of Southern California. It's sun scorched, flat, and runs along Interstate 15 towards Vegas. Trailer home and apartment rents are low. The major industry in the area is meth production. Dad split leaving me and mom to fend for ourselves. Mom graduated from alcohol to opiates to heroin and couldn't raise me. My aunt and uncle filed papers to assume my custody motivated by the specter of being paid by the County as foster parents. They sobered up long enough to pass muster by the county. We lived in a doublewide trailer home.

My aunt's husband, Brady, drove a sewage truck for thirty years. His job was to pump sewage from portable toilets and clean out the filthy plastic bathroom enclosures. His retirement gift for thirty years of service was the sewage truck he drove. He was a schemer but never let anybody in on his scams. He was always tinkering with the truck and one day opened the sewage tank exposing the vile odor from human excrement. We lived miles from the closest neighbor and my aunt and uncle didn't mind the smell because they were drunk most of the time. He climbed inside the smelly tank and installed compartments always telling me to "beat it" if I came close to watch him work.

Dinner was fast food, a can of chili, or frozen dinners. My aunt would often slip into my room in the middle of the night drunk. I'd pretend to sleep as she caressed my body with her hand hoping I'd awake and take her. She would curl next up to me and fall asleep. In the morning, I carefully slid out of bed, dressed, and left for school. I suspect Brady was aware of his wife's behavior but didn't care.

On my eighteenth birthday, I was given a birthday present of sorts. I was handed the key to the sewage truck and told that it was now registered in my name. Brady wanted me to drive the truck to Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and then to Nogales making a stop in each city while unknown people attended to the sewage tank. I asked why and was told, "Because we'll cut off your mom's heroine fixes. What's your decision?"

I was arrested at a state agricultural inspection station when x-ray equipment alerted officers to the hidden compartments Brady constructed in the sewage tank which he packed with meth. I was facing a forty year sentence for interstate transfer of narcotics.

The US Attorney was a kind woman nearing retirement. She offered me a plea deal if I flipped on Brady. I wouldn't rat because my aunt and

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uncle would cut mom off from her heroin. I was a first time offender and the US Attorney knew I was protecting my mother. She took pity on me and recommended to the judge I receive the minimum five year sentence. The judge told me I'd be young enough to begin a "normal" life after prison. Guys like me couldn't live a "normal life" because we never had one. After sentencing, the US Attorney approached me saying, "Timmy, don't let the past dictate your future."

Drivers routinely throw garbage at us. Lopez was hit by a full diaper and Jackson was hit in the head by a vanilla milkshake. They were humiliated. Deputy Horace is napping despite the resounding Stones lyrics, "I see a line of cars and they're all painted black...I see people turn their heads and quickly look away"

Fanny was quick to aid Lopez and Jackson. She tapped on the window jarring Deputy Horace awake. Although I resented Fanny for slowing down the crew, I sympathized with her because she was subjected to vicious daily taunts from drivers about her weight. She politely requested towels and water to clean up Lopez and Jackson but Deputy Horace only threw a dirty towel at her and closed his window. Fanny did her best to clean them up using the dirty towel and the last of the water in the five gallon container.

The humiliation from the thrown garbage served to motivate the crew to finish before dark and get home to forget about the day. Fanny struggled to keep up the pace. Jackson's cough worsened and he spat bloody mucous. Lopez was hobbling with both knees ready to blow out. Jackson whispered, "Timmy, come check this out!"

The crew was standing above a smelly trash bag. It wasn't uncommon to find decaying pets but as we examined the bag, it split open revealing a stillborn baby girl. I ran to Deputy Horace to report the finding. He rolled down the window and I was engulfed by the cool air-conditioning. He said, "Bury it and forget you ever saw it. I don't want the paperwork and you don't want the demerits!"

He closed the window and returned to his video game and I returned to the crew with the instruction. Lopez was kneeling and reciting a Catholic prayer in Spanish. Fanny was cradling the baby doll we found. Jackson had located the most serene location he could find under a California pepper tree which would provide shade over the unmarked grave we dug.

Something snapped in me. My childhood and the job was like moving through the stages of purgatory and the final stage before entering hell was finding a baby in a trash bag with orders to bury it alongside the highway to avoid "paperwork" and "demerits". I was ready to end my misery and take Deputy Horace with me.

It was a typical week of long days and nights but at dusk one evening, I noticed two cars racing each other. One of them split off into the adjoining lane cutting off a semi truck trailer which clipped the racing car sending it across the highway slammed by oncoming traffic but the semi truck trailer was out of control and heading directly towards us. It was my opportunity to end my misery as the semi would kill us all. My finger quivered on the trigger of the warning horn. I had come to respect my crew as friends and knew they had loved ones to return to after proba-

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tion. Although I had nobody waiting for me, I recalled what the judge told me and I sounded the warning horn. Lopez hobbled slowly and Fanny was too slow to avoid the oncoming semi but with the help of Jackson, we dragged them both into the safety of the culvert seconds before the semi slammed into the orange van. Deputy Horace didn't hear the warning horn and the van was crushed into a metal ball and sent rolling onto the highway leaving behind a trail of blood.

Traffic came to a sudden halt. A chorus of horns from frustrated drivers is drowning out the sirens of rescue vehicles approaching the carnage. The people racing by us day after day with contempt, pity, or sadistic pleasure for our plight were now glued to their cell phones, and possibly, confronting their own mortality and meaningless lives.

Jackson muttered, "You got what you deserve, Losers." We discarded our orange vests and helmets wondering down the highway towards a fate unknown but united in the belief "our pasts wouldn't dictate our futures". From a distance, I could hear the Stones lyrics still playing inside the crushed van,

*"I have to turn my head until my darkness goes...
If I look hard enough into the settin' sun
My love will laugh with me before the mornin' comes"*