

Wilderness House Literary Review 14/3

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Douglas Haines was not an impulsive man. He'd given it a lot of thought—his decision final. He stood atop the Savings and Exchange Bank in the financial district of Los Angeles. The wide box toes of his oxfords suspended over the roof's ledge. Ten stories high, with no awning to catch a leg, the sidewalk empty, there would be no question of death.

He looked across Spring Street. The new city hall building dwarfed the Barker Brother's Furniture Company, Coulter Dry Goods, and every structure downtown. Giant candy canes and fake laurel were fastened to street lamps. Outside the post office a Santa Claus rang a bell over a donation pot, shouting, "Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas," mocking Douglas, who'd lost everything in the stock market crash.

Without money, how could he give to charity? There'd be no Christmas tree, no presents for his wife and daughter. Merriment had disappeared with his fortune.

He blamed the bankers, the stockbrokers, himself. Greed had grabbed him by the lapels. He remembered the seductive breath of it urging him to acquire more capital and with it the insatiable appetite for power. The country was drunk with wealth one moment, bankrupt the next.

If only he'd acted! The warnings of a crash had been threatening. First the September market crash in London. The papers promised the Rockefellers and Morgans would save them—*invest*. And there were his nightmares, for over a week, the same one. He was back in the war, in France, clawing his way through the mud to reach the Savings and Exchange Bank. With each handful of sludge, he slid further into an abyss. He'd wake up shaking, his nightshirt soaked. Mary would stroke his face. "It's just a dream, darling."

After the crash she reassured him that money didn't matter as long as they had each other and Lilly. How could she understand? She who was sheltered from the responsibilities of being a husband and father, supporting a family, protecting them, and if required, going off to war. What kind of man was he who had to send his wife and child to her parents' home in St. Louis—and borrow money for the train tickets from his father-in-law?

Now his gut acted up, repeated stabs that sometimes reached his chest. *Mary. Lilly. Hard to finish—thoughts, when . . .* he took a deep breath and found strength in taking charge of his death, a semblance of the person he'd been when supervising hundreds of men.

On the 8th floor below, he'd cleaned out his office—pictures of Mary and Lilly, pencils, pens, letters, awards, his pipe and tobacco, a photograph of himself smiling with the moving picture star Buddy Rogers at the ribbon-cutting ceremonies for Mulholland Highway. His life's work was packed in boxes, sealed against a future, neatly stacked, with all the edges touching, for Douglas Haines was a tidy man.

The Great War made him that way. His Springfield was cleaned, uniform buttons polished, everything in tip-top shape. Orderliness lived with

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him even as he stood on the mantel of the Savings and Exchange Bank: hair combed, shoes waxed, suit pressed.

In 1918, he'd wanted to desert—the bombs, grenades, pissing his pants from the fear of it. He endured but returned home, broken. Now as he gazed out at the dying bruise of a purple and yellow sunset, he *was* deserting. He had no money. A bum. Douglas was more afraid of living without honor, a name, a plaque on his office door announcing his achievements to all who entered, than stepping off a building.

He inched his shoes further over the ledge. Surely death would come in an instant. Then what? Not even the Carnegies or Vanderbilts knew the answer to that.

He saw derbies bobbing along the sidewalk. Where were the men going? Home? To other rooftops? That damn Santa ringing the bell. How come the sun sets—the moon rises? He looked up. There must be stars out by now in St. Louis. Had Lilly made a wish on the first one? He closed his eyes. Teetered.

He grasped his chest, leaned his upper body back. His left hand felt wrong. His thumb rubbed an empty space where his wedding ring had been—best ten years of his life. After he'd packed up his office, he left an envelope on his desk. Inside it he put his wedding band and wallet—also, a note to Mary telling her he loved her and Lilly, and that he was sorry. Would she understand? And Lilly. A child needs a father. His body twitched. He was back in the war, felt the dank mire of the trench, shooting at the Huns, men dying, scared and homesick, longing to run away.

Steady, Haines, he told himself. Find courage in being, a—a what? A coward?

“Mary,” he whispered.

He'd met her after the war. She brought everything that was good and clean and kind into his life, turning his dark world into one of wonder and hope. Then Lilly came. “Daddy's home!” Every night she'd run into his arms. It was the best tonic for a hard day's work. Who could love them more than he did?

He blinked, a hood of darkness flung over his future—never to see his child or hold the woman who brought him back to life. What would they think if they saw him standing on the edge of a building? How would his wife feel if she found him in the morgue? Could they ever forgive him for deserting them?

Douglas Haines was not a crying man. But tears for his family came hard, like a torrent. He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. He stepped down from the ledge and crouched against the side of the building, shaking.

He stood, brushed off his suit, made certain his tie was centered and straight, then walked across the rooftop to the door and opened it.