

## Wilderness House Literary Review 16/1

*Blaine Gray*  
*Reusable*

**D**avid stares at his wrinkled face in the mirror. This was not the way he expected to finish his days on earth. His twin bed takes up a large part of the tidy but small room, light spills from the open door to a small bathroom. The beige walls and brown furniture that decorate Shady Oaks Retirement Village give everything a sense of apathy. The framed medical degree dated 1968 is his only attempt at personalizing the bleak space. David carefully draws an X over Tuesday 26, May on the small desk calendar. He lets out a defeated sigh as he catches his reflection.

David was never a handsome man, but his gentle smile had carved valleys of compassion into his face. His eyes had lost their sparkle long ago. A knock at the door pulls him back to the present. He puts on a surgical mask and opens it to find Mary, still an attractive woman in her seventies. Did you hear they're asking anyone with medical experience to go back to work? She asks. I guess they are running out of doctors. He stares at the mask dangling beneath her nose.

David shuffles his feet and glances behind her down the hall. Did Jerry tell you to say that? She looks confused. Why would Jerry do that, she asks? He inspects her for a moment. It's nothing; he's been bugging me about it ever since he read it in the paper, David grumbles. You going to the cafeteria, he asks? Just ate, on my way back, actually. They stare at each other for a beat as she waits for him to make a move. He doesn't, and the moment passes. Well, I should be getting back to my room, she says. Yeah, ok, he replies as he watches her walk away.

The rising sun streams through the small window above the shower as David finishes shaving. Gently, he traces the contours of his throat as his mind wanders. He ends and steps into the bedroom and carefully crosses off Friday, May 29. A loud knock at the door is quickly followed by an abrasive female voice with a heavy Boston accent. Mr. Johansen, you have a visitor. Annoyed, but intrigued he opens the door. In her late forties with a lousy haircut, wide hips, and a dirty cloth mask, Judith Beans gestures towards a young black woman dressed like a lawyer with a blue surgical mask. This is Beth-Judith is cut short by the young woman. Brenda, my name is Brenda Evans. She steps forward and nods politely, leaving ample space between her and David. Dr. Johansen, I'm with the Seattle health department. He furrows his brow as he waits for her to continue. As you may have heard, we are asking retired professionals such as yourself to come back to help with the pandemic. She pauses, expecting him to engage, he doesn't. Anyway, I'm here to ask...or offer you the opportunity to assist in this unprecedented crisis. She ends her spiel with a smile that makes her eyes crease like sunbeams.

I don't think so, but thank you, just the same, Ms. Evans. As he moves to close the door, Brenda holds out her business card. Take my card, and if you change your mind or just have any questions, please call me, day or night. He reluctantly accepts the card and closes the door on the two women.

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David eats alone at a small table in the cafeteria. A few residents dine in isolation nearby. Jerry, as old as dirt, shuffles towards his table, balancing his tray on the walker. He slides in next to David. Scoot over, you schmuck. David starts to protest but thinks better of it and makes room for Jerry to sit. An older Hispanic woman watching over the room approaches and reprimands them. Mr. Jerry, you know you can't sit that close because of the covid, she says. Fuck covid, Jerry grunts. I lived through the Korean War-fucking winters in Korea make your dick freeze off-literally; I saw a man's penis freeze up, and when it broke off and hit the ground-shattered like glass. The orderly looks exasperated but knows it's useless to fight him. She walks away, shaking her head. You no blame me if you catch the covid.

You hear about Mary's granddaughter, Jerry asks? No, what happened? She got the covid, Jerry states. She's young, she'll be fine. It's us old farts that need to be worried, David replies. She has bronco... tassels, so she's really sick, I guess, says Jerry. Bronchiectasis, David asks? Yeah, that's the one, Jerry replies. She's in intensive care, and it's not looking good; the hospitals are just too damn busy to do much doctoring, he states. David looks concerned as he unwraps a bland-looking cookie from cellophane and takes a small bite.

The shuttle will take you back and forth between the hotel and hospital; it runs every fifteen minutes, Dr. Johansen, Brenda says as they exit the highway towards a looming hospital. David is fine-call me, David, he says loudly over the noise from the open windows. David nervously eyes the pale white building as they approach. She pulls up to the front of the building and hands him two N95 masks as he steps out. Thank you for doing this, David. They stare at each other for a moment before he shuts the door and turns back to find an older female Filipino nurse approaching him. Dr. Johansen, follow me, please. She gestures for him to follow her as she heads into the hospital.

I'm Jessica, you can call me Jessie or J is fine. I'll be the one helping you get set up with payroll and figuring out where you'll be working. Payroll, he questions? She stops and looks at him with a smirk; you didn't think we weren't gonna pay you, did you? She spins and heads into the building before he can answer.

The hospital reminds him of the nine circles of hell, beginning with the coughing patients lined up in limbo waiting to be seen. As they walk deeper into the bowels of the building, they pass through a cacophony of sounds; coughing, retching, sobbing, and finally, the worst of all, silence. The nurse gestures him into a bright, fluorescent break room, where two exhausted looking doctors slam red bulls to stave off the exhaustion. Dr. Malone, early thirties and clinging to his arrogance, nods at the nurse. This the new guy, he asks? David eyes him angrily but stops himself from starting an argument. David, it's nice to meet you. Dr. Malone inspects him like he's a dead bug. What exactly did you practice, way back when you were a doctor, he asks. Don't be an asshole, says the other young doctor next to him. I'm Roger Brown, and this idiot is Jeff; he's actually a pretty good neurologist, not that it matters these days since we're so shorthanded everyone does everything. I highly doubt...David here will be doing any neurology work here, sneers Dr. Malone.

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Thank you for helping out, we're overwhelmed, and any help is appreciated, says Roger. General Practitioner, David says softly. I was a family doctor in Granite Falls for many years. Welcome aboard, David, says Roger as he and Malone head for the door. We are scraping the bottom of the barrel these days, Malone mutters loudly as he exits. David and Jessie listen as the voice on the loudspeaker announces a code blue in room 401. That guy's a dick, Jessie says as they head for the door.

The hotel room is basic but larger than his room at Shady Oaks. David flips through TV channels as he eats noodles from Chinese takeout.

David carefully draws an X over June 25, 2020, as he readies himself for work; outside, the sun peeks over the horizon as birds wake and chirp to one another.

David stares out the window as the shuttle drives him and one other passenger through the deserted streets towards the hospital.

David sits at a table near the entrance taking people's temperatures as they sign in to be seen. Clearly underutilized, he does his best to be helpful to the patients as they cycle past. How's it going? Asks Jessie as she checks in on him. This isn't exactly what I expected when I signed up to help, he replies. No offense, but I'm a trained doctor, and a child could do this job. She nods understandingly, everyone is doing their part to help, and we appreciate you doing this, she replies on automatic. The line lets up for a moment, and Jessie slumps into a chair next to him; after a beat, she drops the facade. It sucks, I know. I'm sorry, this whole thing is horrible. She fights back the tears. He gently pats her knee as she pulls it back together and lets out a soft exhale. This must be really hard to get used to coming from a small practice, she says.

It's bigger, that's for sure, but I was the only doctor for almost fifty miles when I started my practice. No hospital or ambulance was coming to save the day. It was me and Meg, my wife. She ran the billing, but she had to assist me with some hairy situations a few times. That actually sounds really terrifying, Jessie replies.

David draws an X over July 7, 2020, as he sips a cup of coffee. A small bird lands in the tree outside his window, drawing his attention. He stares at it intently for a long beat, a soft smile crosses his face; a tiny sparkle of life glimmers in his eyes.

David struggles to keep up with Jessie as she rushes down the hallway. You've done a C-section before, right? Yes, he calls out hesitantly as he loses pace. She makes a sharp left and scans her ID card to unlock swinging doors, a sign on the wall reads Maternity Ward.

Jessie rushes down the hallway and past several worried-looking nurses standing outside a door. In here, Jessie commands as she steps into a room.

The room is in chaos as David enters; Dr. Malone is hunched over a very pregnant woman, both covered in blood. More sponge, goddammit, Malone yells to the nurse assisting him. The pregnant woman is awake but can't see the carnage due to a small sheet blocking her view. Her stomach and other organs are currently resting in a stainless steel bowl as Malone

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works desperately to stop the massive flow of blood leaving her body. Malone spots David. What the fuck is he doing here?

He can help, says Jessie. Malone thinks for a moment and relents. I can't stop the bleeding, he says. David moves to the woman and peers into her body. We need to get the baby out first. Grab that alcohol, he points at a bottle near Jessie. She picks it up as he holds out his hands over the nearby sink. Start pouring, he says. David quickly sterilizes and dons surgical gloves; he moves to the woman and confidently begins manipulating the baby as he carefully extracts it and hands it off to the nurse. The mother smiles faintly as she hears the cries of the newborn before fainting from blood loss.

Jessie watches as David feels around inside the woman's body while a nurse begins a blood transfusion. Malone looks devastated as he pulls back and watches. Got it, David smiles as he carefully clamps off a vein. He leans back and exhales as they watch the woman's vitals stabilize on the monitors.

The sun rises slowly as David tosses pieces of his bagel to the waiting bird on the balcony. His eyes sparkle with life as he puts on his shoes. A newscast on the TV displays a covid chart with a downward trend. The reporter informs that emergency rooms across the state have finally begun to free up space as the number of positive covid cases decline.

David exits the shuttle and heads into the hospital with a purposeful stride. Dr. Johansen, a voice calls as he enters the building. David turns to find Malone heading towards him. David smiles as he approaches. What can I do for you, Dr. Malone? I know you're leaving us today, but I was hoping you could take a look at a patient that I'm having trouble with? Sure, David replies as he follows him down the hallway.

It's dusk when David finally arrives back at Shady Oaks, the place looks elegant in the soft lighting. He smiles to himself as he grabs his suitcase and heads inside.

The solid knock on the door surprises Mary as she sips a cup of tea and watches TV. Hello? She calls out. It's David, he replies. She opens the door and greets him warmly, David! How are you? He doesn't say a word as he pulls her close and kisses her. Oh my, David, she murmurs, what has gotten into you? A hint of doubt crosses David's face; too much, he asks? Not at all, she replies as she pulls him into the room and closes the door.