

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Charles Hayes
The Accident

Stepping lightly along the old dirt road to my shack, I see the moon lift above the bumpy horizon that surrounds me and the hollow that I live in. I pause for the view as the call of the whip-poor-will challenges my return. Peering about for the bird, I notice the reflected light from the creek, its flickering sparkle calling time for the tune played by its sandstone pebbles. Suddenly on the periphery I see it, the eerie red glow of the whip-poor-will's eye. It is in the weeds between the road and the creek. Many nights, through the window of my bedroom, its call has padded my anxious thoughts. Glowing like a tiny brake light afar, the eye is all that I can see of the bird. In the moonlight I wonder if it can see me. Maybe it is too busy calling for a mate to notice my creeping. Drawing closer, I hear the soft murmur of wings followed by feathered air to my face. It is gone.

This night has been OK, I guess. Just me and the whip-poor-will..... and the snake. Earlier I stepped on a snake that was gathering warmth from the road. Although I never saw it, I knew it was a snake. Springing to the air as soon as my foot felt its round largeness, its wiggle, I heard the weeds bend as it slithered off the road. Only a black snake I figured since I was not bitten.



Back in my shack, a little four room affair with an outside toilet, the freedom of being outside with other living things slowly drains away. It is replaced with a caged feeling that causes me to count the hours until my next night walk. The night walks keep me going ever since the accident over there. I was busy over there and had too much to do to think about it. And others didn't seem to be bothered by it. But when I was sent home the scabs on my face turned mushy and rubbed off.....and there were no others. With the scabs gone, and no others to pass among, I stick to the night and avoid the looks. Surely, the lookers must know about the accident.



Dark skinned and with eyes that are almost black, the VA shrink quickly enters the examining room, gives me a smiling nod, and sits on the large desk with one foot on the floor and my file open on his thigh. In his early forties, tall and lanky, he moves with the quick, surefooted grace of a soccer player. Over there I would watch them play sometimes and wonder if they had seen the accident? Were they part of it? Starched, pressed, and smelling of disinfectant, the shrink reminds me of an Arab Mr. Clean prepared to vanquish all the dirty demons in the heads of those that have been cursed.

"You are Ben James," he says, "I saw you last month?"

I nod.

"Is there anything that you wish to talk about today? Something that would maybe make you feel better?"

I shake my head thinking that it's always about talk, digging up bones, blabber, blabber. What good will talk do my sores?

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"Take off the sunglasses and remove the face mask," he says, "I want to see your eyes."

Grudgingly, I uncover my face. Now this Arab doctor will see my sores and he will know about the accident.

"How do they look?" I ask.

Without looking up from my chart he replies, "How does what look?"

"The sores," I say. "I think maybe they are more infected."

Lowering the chart, he looks at me and shakes his head.

"There are no sores, Ben. Your skin is as unblemished as a baby's ass. Are you taking the medicine I gave you for sleep?"

I am taking multiple doses and chasing them with a glass of vodka to even approach sleep but I simply say, "Yes."

"Good, good, you know that we are here to help."

Scribbling on a pad, he tears the leaf off and hands it to me on his way to the door.

"Here's a fresh prescription," he says, "have it filled at the pharmacy on your way out. I'll see you next month."

I don my glasses and face mask as the door closes and hurry out of the building to the safety of my car. Maybe next month the sores will be better. I mean, what does he know?



Smashing into the side of my head, the butt stock of the Kalashnikov almost knocks me cold. Stars and flashing lights blossom in my vision. Like watching a film play at half speed, I see the concrete floor slowly rise up to smash my face. Lying in the rubble, I know that I am still conscious because I can taste the dirt and feel the warm blood running down my cheek. An older Arab, holding a Kalashnikov and stretching to the roof it seems, is standing over me. Dressed in a common disha dasha but shod in good desert boots, he wears a bandolier of ammunition over his shoulder and several grenades attached to a web belt. Three other slightly younger men, dressed similarly except for the boots, are with him. They wear only sandals. All have faces marked by hatred and contempt as they stare down at me. The older one says something in Arabic that makes the others laugh as he kicks me in the stomach. For the next several minutes they beat me. Still laughing, they strip my boots and desert fatigues and drag me to a half collapsed wall. They drape me head first over the wall and tie my hands and arms to separate supporting posts and spread my legs before doing the same with them. More excited now and looking at each other like addicts of cruelty before the feed, they rip off my underwear, leaving me naked from the waist down. Suddenly my fear turns to terror as the older man grabs my ass with both hands, looks at the others, and says something in Arabic. Moments of silence follow.....until I hear the thud of a bandolier hitting the floor. Looking over my shoulder, I see the leader, his dark eyes riveted to mine, remove his web belt and gently place it beside the bandolier. Lifting off his disha dasha, he reveals a huge erect penis with a bulbous scarlet head as big as a softball. The mammoth

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cock head, like a half human-half phallic being, has the face of a laughing clown. Wild tufts of red hair growing from the sides of its bald head start flapping like wings as it prepares to mount me. A rumbling sound in the background, barely audible at first, grows louder when I feel the kiss of the clown. I scream.

At first, when I open my eyes, I do not recognize the torn and faded wallpaper near the edge of my bed. It is the rumbling sound of the morning school bus outside my bedroom window that nudges me around to where I am. My blanket is on the floor and the sheets and mattress cover are pulled from the mattress. Lifting my head from the pillow, wet with spit and sweat, I come to an elbow. Stretching out my hand, I watch it shake. My whole body is shaking. And the sores on my face are running wild. With trembling effort I stumble to the kitchen for the good medicine, fearing that it will be gone. There. Thank God. On the counter near the medicine cabinet with no mirror sits the half gallon bottle of vodka.....still a third full. Ripping out the plastic jigger with a fork so that it will flow unimpeded, I grab it tight with both hands and turn it up. I do not count the gulps. It is like air. What difference does it make? Lowering the bottle after I have pulled enough to stay together, I look at the clock over the refrigerator and count almost 12 hours until darkness.



Cool nights amplify the crunching sound of my steps on a ground covered with brilliantly colored and dying leaves. Impromptu detours off the roads and paths of my night walks are not as silent as before. Winter will quieten things down again soon. But my range will be limited by the drag of the snow. That's ok though, for there will be less sweat on my sores. Tonight I am leaving the hollow. The changing dusk, like a lizard of morphing colors, fads to a grayish blue hue before offering up its darkest cover. I check the failing light just in time to see a wild turkey soar from one ridge, where it has fed, to another, where it will roost.

Reaching the river that drains all the hollows and their secret places, I hop from rock to rock out towards the smoother, quieter water. The large sandstone rocks slow the flow enough to kick up a little white froth. I use them as beacons for the traverse. Furthest out is where I like it best. Out there the rock is big and comfortable enough to spend time and not need to rush. When I get to my spot, camouflaged by the ways of the river, I look like a big wet spot on the tan colored rock to any shore side observer. Like Siddhartha, I wash my sores in the never ending waters that flow around me. This medicine that has no beginning nor any end is my favorite--a life without accidents.....or accidents that are only life. Far beyond my rock, near the other shore, the loud slap of a beaver tail tells me that there are living things here. It is important to be among the living things.

Not like here where the beaver lives, there is so much death over there. I was sick of it after the accident. At least that is what they said when they decided that I better go on a medical discharge. Having me around didn't help when it came to explaining to the village chief how a young mother and her baby got incinerated by a white phosphorus grenade. Probably I was done and gone when that happened. And in my hurry the grenade must have slipped from my cartridge belt. The child found it, pulled the pin, and whoosh, crispy critters, one big black burnt mound of flesh lying

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by a little black burnt mound of flesh. I don't know for sure what happened, the fog of war and all, my memory is not so good. A terrible accident, the others took up. But the scabbed over burns on my face were hard to explain with desert mites, a terrible itch, and a vicious scratch. Best I get shipped back home to recover. A terrible accident.

I just wanted to see her up close, make a little visit. Babies are such idiots. They will drag around anything. A terrible accident.

My sores are not that bad this evening, a little drier than usual. The river is the best for me. Soon I will crack the ice and the beaver will no longer herald my arrival with a tail smack that sounds like a one gun salute-one gun is plenty to do the job. I know this for sure, but I don't need it. I am a modest man. And the new medicine from the VA takes less Vodka to work. I sleep some.....but only during the day. I must have the nights for my walks, my therapy. The VA shrink says that I am getting better. Maybe soon my sores will heal and I can get further out, mix it up a bit.