

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/1

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The Stick-Up Artist

Adapted from LOSING ART, a memoir

Art and I sat in Big Blue Truck in the rain in front of our Main Street shop, with the windshield wipers going steadily back and forth, watching people scoot by.

It had been Art's idea—born of both fear and desperation—to expand our tile manufacturing business to include retail, after it became clear that the revenue from tile-making was not going to be enough. We were an artist and a writer, neither one of us had any experience at all in manufacturing or retail, not to mention dealing with the second and third generation welfare recipients who made up the workforce in this small, depressed upstate New York town. We had just moved here from East Hampton in an attempt to save our floundering business—and we were completely out of our league—constantly on the verge of losing what little we had.

So, we put up a large curtain, reminiscent of a wall hanging that could be found in a Gypsy Fortune Teller Shop, to separate a small tile showroom in front of the larger tile-making space behind it. But, unlike the mystery created in a Gypsy Fortune Telling Shop by the tall dark curtains hiding what secret depths beyond; there was no mystery in our shop about what was behind our curtain. The fluorescent work lights could be seen, hanging from the high ceiling above our not-quite-to-the-ceiling curtain rod. The tile-makers could be heard, talking and laughing and arguing over the racket they made banging their molds on the worktable to get the air bubbles out of the cement mixture. It was a smoke-friendly workplace, and, though it was not a requirement to work there, all of our workers smoked. Cigarette smoke and cement dust billowed out above and beneath and right through the weave of the curtain separating manufacturing from our tile shop.

Art flipped off the ignition in the truck and turned sideways to face me. If we're gonna make this work, we need to make some changes, he said.

What do you mean?

Sweetie, Art said, tipping my chin up and looking intently into my face. While we were out walking yesterday, our tile-makers said some rich-looking guy walked in, and it's not the first time it happened.

So ... You think we need to keep regular shop hours?

Our ignorance astounds me now—that it could possibly have been a revelation to two seemingly bright people that a shop should have hours.

Yeah, I think our walks hand-in-hand by the river need to be limited to our days off. We're really good at this. But if we don't take ourselves seriously, who will? ... And I think asking rich Woodstock ladies to dust themselves off is getting old. This town is really forgiving because we're expected to fail here, but we're gonna blow it if we're not careful.

You're right I said. So, where do we go from here, do you think?

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I think we should buy a building with a good retail space and a separate area for manufacturing.

That's a big commitment to this town, I said.

I don't think we could do it anywhere else, not with our credit. The Micro-Enterprise loan is perfect for us, and seriously—who else are they gonna loan money to?

What about 354? Art asked me.

354 what?

354 Main Street, the building.

We had been looking at buildings for weeks because more than half of the buildings on Main Street were for sale. There were empty buildings that reeked of age and neglect, mouse droppings and mold. Piles of what appeared to be fresh rat shit littered the floors of a second floor apartment above a defunct pizza parlor. We trudged through eau-de-cabbage-smelling dark railroad-flat apartments, with apologies for disturbing the residents. One apartment had the largest widescreen TV I had ever seen, with five or six glossy eyed tenants sitting on a long black-Naugahyde sectional sofa, mesmerized by what was on the screen.

354 Main Street had a large sign in the window: *\$35,000 AS IS*.

You're kidding, I said. The ceiling is on the floor ... it's raining inside.

It has great bones, Art replied. It would be a perfect retail space. The second floor has a back entrance at ground level. We could make tiles there.

There are rotten floorboards, layers of soot, wet insulation, mold and rotten plaster covering the entire third floor, I said. I don't think it's been used since it was a whorehouse.

Well yeah, but maybe its old use is grandfathered in, in case things fall apart with tiles.

Very funny.

Art was on a roll. I was just talking to someone who used to be a madam there. She worked on the second floor, where they would match up the girls with the Johns. Oh, and the guy who works in the liquor store used to tend bar at the White Horse Tavern on the ground floor. He said it was pretty bad. Dangerous.

I knew when I was defeated. Okay—if we're gonna renovate a building, why not choose the one that really needs rehabilitation?

There's the spirit!

We needed to put on a new roof immediately—it was raining inside through three stories. Choosing a contractor was easy, Art and I were crazy about Jake from the start.

Jake was a burly guy, brusque, rough around the edges. Like many Upstate New Yorkers, he was a Brooklyn transplant. He was the kind of a guy that if you said to him, I need a favor, he would say yes first, and then ask what the favor was. He met with us briefly and then went up on

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the roof. The next day he came to our shop with a detailed contract, which included a clause at the end that said he wanted to work with us because we were, Like me and my wife, working together.

Whatever happens in business, he said to us, I know we'll all become friends. You guys have to come over tonight for coffee, meet my wife Annie, and our kids.

We were instantly absorbed into the family unit, Jake and Annie, their two young children, Melissa and Mikey, two boisterous golden retrievers, and two cats who walked around purring and rubbing against everyone's ankles. Annie was about ten years younger than Jake; solid like Jake, but sexy, when she looked at him. They were clearly in love with each other, it was evident in everything they said and did. We could see what he meant when he said we were like Jake and his wife, not just working together, but loving each other too.

We had been at Jake and Annie's for about twenty minutes, drinking coffee, eating cake, chatting about this and that. The kids enthusiastically showed us their drawings and asked us to watch them play Nintendo. Annie pointed to a small, framed picture and said, That's the place we stayed the first night, when Jake got out of prison. The last word, prison, was whispered sotto voce.

Prison? Art asked in his normal inside voice. He was pretty deaf, he wanted to be sure he heard her correctly.

Annie put her fingers to her lips and looked at her children.

It's time to put the kids to bed and pray as a family, Jake said. Would you like to join us?

Thanks, no. We'll wait for you here, Art said. Prayer made us uncomfortable—we were both fairly militant atheists, at the time.



I was in for armed robbery, Jake said when they came back.

I didn't know that, Art said.

Yeah, Jake said as he grabbed his wife and pulled her onto his lap. Annie was the warden's secretary.

Jake pointed to a framed picture on a side table of a much younger Jake and Annie. This is what I looked like then, he said.

You had a washboard stomach and arms like tree trunks, Art said.

Art pointed to the Annie side of the picture, You looked so young ... how old were you then?

Annie looked almost wistful. I was twenty, she said.

How many women were there working at the prison? I asked.

There were five of us.

Looking at Jake, Art said, You must have been hot ... to win her.

Annie answered for Jake, He walked into my office and said, You're gonna marry me someday, and I said, You're already married, and I don't

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even like you!

We all laughed.

Jake tried to explain to us what it was like on the inside. He walked off the eight-foot by eight-foot cell for us in his kitchen. Here was the bed. Here were the filing cabinets. There were two. There was only supposed to be one. Here, above the plywood desk were the framed pictures of Annie.

They used to come in and search my cell, looking for her letters. They would tear apart the bedding and put everything on the desk. He put an imaginary pile of stuff on top of where the desk would have been and looked up at the wall. They never once looked up to see her pictures.

Where were the letters? I asked.

He told me they were destroyed, Annie answered.

Jake gave us a small smile, They were in my buddy's cell, he said.

Tell them what you used to do when you were mad at me.

Jake gave us a larger smile. Turned the pictures to the wall.

A few days later, at the end of a day of working on our roof, Jake sat at the front table in our shop, nodding out. After he left, I said to Art, He's a heroin addict.

Art was sure I had to be mistaken. How can that be? He's such a family man.

I'd really like to think you're right, I said, but heroin use—grainy voice, pinned pupils, heavy eyelids—is unmistakable.

You have to be wrong about Jake, Art said.

Maybe he has some strange ailment that closely mimics heroin addiction, I said doubtfully.

For sure Jake was high functioning, and he got our entire building renovated inside of six months—and on budget. Art and I looked forward to the time we spent at least once a week in Jake and Annie's kitchen, drinking coffee, eating cake and listening to Jake's stories.

We were still in the old shop, working on something-or-other on the computer in Art's back office, when Jake and Annie came to visit us there. It was obvious that they were both really upset.

Everything okay? Art asked.

Jake has esophageal cancer, Annie said, and she burst into tears.

I got up to hug Annie, Art put his around Jake's shoulders, and Art and I locked eyes, our look silently communicating what we were both thinking: Jake's sick. He's not a drug addict—he has cancer.

The doc said, I'm going to have to treat this aggressively if we have any chance to make you well, Jake said, determination that he was going to beat this, clear in his voice. So, I said, Make me sick, doc!

Art and I were both in deep denial about Jake's drug addiction. We told ourselves that it was the disease that caused Jake to fall asleep sitting

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at the table with a cigarette dangling from his lips, or to nod out while he was driving his truck. Jake stopped driving, and Annie bought smoke detectors and put them all over the house.

Time went on, and Jake got sicker and sicker, so Jake and Annie decided to go for a second opinion. Annie called us in tears from Sloan Kettering. The son of a bitch doctor here won't treat him unless he goes on a methadone program. They said being cured was a privilege, not a right

That's ridiculous! Jake hasn't shot dope in more than twenty years.

I was shocked to realize that after I had been off heroin for more than twenty-five years, not only had I established a close relationship with an active heroin addict, I had participated with his wife in her denial about his addiction. I had ignored the truth—I knew Jake was an addict—I could see it in his half-lidded eyes, the pupils like pinpricks, I could hear it in his gravelly voice. Art and I were both crazy about Jake—and part of his appeal, no doubt, was his bad-boy image. We justified it easily enough: he might be a drug addict and an armed bank robber—but he would never ever harm us. Well, the fact is, he never did.

You were right, Art said to me after we got off the phone.

Yeah.

Jake went back to his doctor in Albany. After radiation and chemotherapy, they performed the surgery to remove the tumor that should have been made inert—but the surgeon couldn't get to the tumor because of gunshot wounds from years ago.

Coffee at Jake and Annie's continued to be a regular thing for Art and me. Jake told us stories about his life. One evening when we stood up to go, Jake said, Wait—I just want to tell you one more thing.

There was this guy who used to work for me. Bobby. This was in the days when we were first hearing about AIDS.

He was supposed to do some painting. Took him the whole day to do what should have taken two hours. Couldn't stand to be in the sun. I drove him home and fired him.

After I got home, I thought about how sick he was. I called the AIDS hotline and described the symptoms. They said it could be AIDS.

I wondered how Jake could have possibly guessed that Bobby might have AIDS on so little evidence.

Jake continued, Next day I came back to his house to pick him up for work. He said, No, you really should fire me, I'm no good.

I said, You'll just put up some gutters out of the sun. At the end of the day, I took him up to Albany Med.

By the time they had run all the tests they wanted to run, it was four in the morning. They couldn't find anything wrong with him.

I asked, Did you run the test for AIDS?

They said, We're not allowed to.

I said, Is there an AIDS doctor attached to the hospital?

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They said there was.

I said, Get his ass here! They woke him up.

I told Bobby that I would be with him. That we would fight this thing together, but he would have to fight harder. And when he didn't want to fight anymore, that he wouldn't have to die alone.

For a year, I came home every night after work, spent a couple of hours with Annie and the kids, and then I spent the night at Bobby's. I came home in the morning to have breakfast with her, and then off to work again.

When he got really sick, I even got into bed with him, and we crossed our legs Indian style.

At the end he had to go to hospice. He couldn't really talk. He would squeeze my hand to let me know he understood what I was saying.

On the day that he died, I said, I'll see you later, squeeze back if you understand. There was no squeeze back. I left him with his sister.

At 10:26 I pulled off the road. I had this empty feeling.

When I got home, Bobby's sister was here. She looked at me, and I said, Bobby died at 10:26.

She said, How did you know?

I said, I felt it.

In the car, driving home that night, I asked Art, Was that story true?

I don't see how it could be. Jake doesn't read medical texts.

Yeah ... not to mention how did Bobby's sister beat him home. Do you think Jake was telling us the story of the way he wished he had lived his life?

Maybe. But I think the story was intended for me.

The next time we came back to Jake and Annie's for coffee, we could see that they had both been crying.

What's going on? I asked.

Jake and Annie stood close together. He put his arms around her, and they kissed.

Annie said, The cancer has spread to his liver.

The doctor gave me six months, Jake said. Who the hell made him God? ... Even though I know for a fact that there's life after death.

What do you mean, Jake? Art asked.

When I was shot, they pronounced me dead. I saw my father and my brother and they're both dead. They were in the most beautiful field you could imagine. They told me to go back, and I did. When I came back, my heart started beating again.

Shot ... when were you shot? I asked.

Oh right, you didn't know about that ... it was during my last holdup.

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It was a convenience store, but I knew they were running numbers there. The whole thing was a set-up. The side door was open, just like it was supposed to be. The only thing that I didn't know was that the clerk was an undercover FBI man.

I went in the side door and pointed my gun at the guy and asked him for the money. He started to go in the register, and I said, Not that money. So, he gave me the real money. I asked him to lay down on the floor until I was out of there. I guess it was my fault. I should've frisked him.

When I got to the front door, he opened fire. He put five bullets into me. The last shot was in my hand when I reached for my gun. That one really hurt. I didn't have a clear shot at him because there was a kid in the way. I guess he had a clear shot at me because he didn't hit the kid.

I could hear the sirens when I got to my car. I drove to the hospital and walked into the emergency room.

I interrupted. You walked into the emergency room with five bullets in you?

I was rewarded with Jake's small smile. Yeah.

Annie asked Jake to show us the stitches. He looked as if they had inserted a giant zipper, beginning at his groin, wrapping halfway around his body, and ending in the middle of his back. His skin was pasty, his muscles flaccid.

My lawyer told me I was going to jail, and it didn't matter if it was one robbery or sixty.

How many places did you rob? Art asked.

I was indicted for sixty-two armed robberies.

Annie left the room and came back with two yellowed newspaper articles that had been reinforced with scotch tape. You can each read one and switch. Annie sat on the couch while we read, looking almost kittenish as she gazed at Jake.

Art and I both scanned the articles. I could see that there were indeed sixty-two charges.

Polite bandits? Art asked, pointing to the clipping he was holding.

Yeah. We were known as the polite bandits. We always said, Put your hands on your head, please. Lay down on the floor, please.

The last day we robbed four banks. Well, the first one didn't count. I heard this pssst sound coming from the money.

I said to my partner, Throw the money out the window!

My partner said, What?

I said throw the money out the window!

What? My partner said.

Suddenly, there was this explosion, and the whole car was filled with red. I had to open the window and stick my head out so I could see to drive.

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I asked him, Why didn't you do what I said?

And my partner said, I didn't hear you.

We all laughed.

Jake went on. We used to go back twenty minutes after the robberies.

What about video surveillance? I asked.

Ski masks. They had special equipment to reconstruct faces with ski masks on, so we used to wear band aids coated with mercury under the ski masks to distort the image. We would go in and check out all the undercover surveillance people after the robbery. We knew all their faces.

We went to the auto wreckers for the cars. We'd pay five hundred dollars for a car that runs, and then another five hundred for it to be scrapped.

Jake held up an imaginary cubic foot of metal. The getaway car.

So, I said, you went to prison and you met Annie and you turned your life around.

Art said, What made you change?

Jake shrugged. I was planning to come out and make a couple of big scores and retire. Even when I was inside, I was making a thousand dollars a week.

I called my lawyer the other day. Mentioned that I'm terminal. Asked him to look after my family if they ever need anything. He said, You got it.

I've been thinking that I should do one last score, to set them up. He gestured to Annie.

Art smiled and said, Can I come too?

Jake laughed. Everything has changed. I'd probably get caught.

Jake and Annie walked us to the door.

Jake put his arm around Annie. We've decided to go for counseling, he said. We don't know how to do this. It's my cancer, but Annie is in just as much pain as I am. Do I share my pain with her, or do I keep it inside? We don't know. If Annie did more for me, she'd be doing my breathing for me, but sometimes I feel so alone.



The Christmas in July fundraiser for Jake was Annie's idea, as was the idea of calling the local news to cover the event. The first night seemed to Art and me to be a dismal failure, but a news crew can make a few people look like a crowd; and the second night there was a crowd.

When Annie had called us with her idea, Art and I were less than optimistic. ... Two nights? ... Christmas?

The house was lit with ten-thousand lights. It sent out a glow for several blocks surrounding the house.

Jake rested, waiting to make his appearance as Santa Clause. He looked so tired. You feeling up to this? I asked him.

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Jake gave me a thumbs up gesture and his small smile.

My job was to take Polaroid pictures of the kids on Jake/Santa's lap. Art's job was to collect the five-dollar fee. Jake did an awesome job, and after a long second night, we had a large jar filled with five and ten-dollar bills.

The disk jockey played dance music.

The last tune they played was *Stand by Me*. Everyone there made a large circle around them, as Jake and Annie held each other, and they danced.

*When the night has come
And the land is dark
And the moon is the only light we'll see
No I won't be afraid
Oh, I won't be afraid
Just as long as you stand, stand by me*

I grabbed the polaroid camera, and I sobbed as I took picture after picture of the two of them holding each other tight.



Jake had tubes attached to every part of his body: tubes that took the fluid from his lungs; tubes that helped him breathe, tubes in his arms that kept him hydrated and supplied the steady stream of morphine that couldn't quite touch his pain. He'd had the maximum lifetime allowance for chemo and radiation. Cancer was everywhere.

From the television on the wall in his hospital room, firemen combed the ruins of The World Trade Center searching for survivors.

Annie and the kids slept on the pullout couch in Jake's room. Melissa and Mikey did their homework and got ready for bed.

You know what I would like? Jake asked.

What would you like, Jake? Annie asked.

Italian.

Art and I were happy to do something....anything. ... fulfill a dying man's request for a last supper. We'll find some Italian food and bring it back, Art said. Is there anything in particular you would like?

He won't eat any of it, Annie said. Her voice was choked with sobs.

Meatballs, Jake said. Spaghetti. Garlic bread.

We found an Italian restaurant and brought back a feast. By the time we got back, Jake had changed his mind about eating. We left the food at the nurse's station for anyone who was hungry.

A couple of days later I got a call from Annie telling me that Jake was gone. She was still at the hospital. I told her to stay put.

Annie told me what had happened while I drove her back from the hospital in her car. I took the kids to school, and I went home to feed the dogs ... I told Jake that I would be back. When I got back to the room, I

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could see that he had waited for me ... I realized that I was keeping him alive for me, because I couldn't stand to lose him. I took him in my arms and held him and I said, It's okay Jake, you can go. He closed his eyes and then he was gone.

Annie cried quietly and stared at the road in front of us. Do you think you could drive a little faster? she asked.

I glanced down at the speedometer and realized that I was driving at forty miles per hour in a sixty-five mile an hour zone.

One thing Annie said months later, sticks with me. It doesn't get better, you just get used to it.