

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

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Harmless and Wrapped in Cellophane

Office life for Frankie consisted of making copies, drinking shitty unbranded coffee, and staring at her boss from her desk in the corner of his office. It's not like anyone expects office life to be glamorous, especially when the job description starts with "admin" but there was a lack of magic that she'd always expected to experience. Where was the intrigue? Weekends off? She somehow managed to always work Sunday mornings before she fell asleep from a night at the bar. Perhaps that was the intrigue: that she could suddenly afford to drink until last call instead of having to show up already plastered so it would only take a couple tequila sodas to send her into oblivion.

Frankie stood at the copier, watching the white paper get spat out onto the tray with the faint outlines of small print mocked her. Beads of sweat began to appear on her forehead because it was summer, the hottest summer on record, and she was stuck in a sports jacket because having tattoos is only professionally allowed in food service or sometimes the local mall. She imagined her grandmother standing next to her, donned in a similarly uncomfortable polyester pantsuit, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms. She'd probably be telling Frankie "I told you so" about the thousands of dollars worth of ink she had on her arms and her chest and her back.

The copier wheezed to a halt and Frankie took the stack of paper, thumbed through it to make sure all of the pages were in order, and walked back into the office she shared with her boss, James.

James was a cool dude. There was no doubt about that. He paid her well and often offered bi-monthly bonuses so she could actually use her vacation days or finish saving for a car. He had virtually no hair on his face, unless it was Friday (then there was stubble) and he wore the same outfit almost every day only ever changing out tie colors. Frankie was convinced he owned several of the same suits because he didn't smell like he was wearing truly the same clothes every day. She had worked for him for two and a half years and despite finding more and more things to hate about working in an office she never hated her boss. It's not his fault the days were running into each other.

Her boss was under the impression that he was very intuitive about her moods. Yes, they'd gotten to know each other over the couple of years, but he assumed always knew when she was bored. Not necessarily bored with work, but bored in general.

"Any big weekend plans, Frankie?" he asked over the sounds of stapling.

She looked up from her stack of papers, half stapled half not. Her brows furrowed in confusion.

"Frankie, you can't tell me you didn't realize it was Friday," James continued, absentmindedly picking at what would become his 5 o'clock shadow.

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James watched as Frankie's eyes looked to the wall calendar and scanned for the date. She focused first on finding the week they were in, then she checked her computer screen, and looked back at the calendar.

"Huh," she said finally, "it is in fact Friday."

"Frankie, I know I'm working you hard but not that hard. How did you forget what day it is?" he asked with a small chuckle.

"Not enough caffeine," she responded with a smile. That wasn't totally untrue. She *was* getting tired of drinking that shitty office coffee. Really the issue was that she was getting so used to the rest of her life looking like copy paper, documents she didn't understand, and polyester, that she started eating large edibles an hour before she went on lunch. By the time she came back, she was blissfully stoned. It made the administrative job worthwhile.

It was already 4:28pm. To say she miscalculated the strength of her pot brownie was an understatement. She couldn't remember ever being this high in her life. She could've been levitating over her chair for all she was concerned. Her head felt like it was filled with helium and her body tingled and buzzed.

James began to look at her as if she were pinched under a microscope and he was a biologist deeply enthralled in whatever his specimen was up to under the glass. He noticed how bloodshot her eyes were, how her usual slouch was heavier and she appeared to be pulled towards the floor. James had never smoked weed before or knowingly been around someone who was high. To him, Frankie looked depressed or like she'd been crying.

"Do you wanna head home early, Frank? Everything okay?" he asked her.

Ha. If only he knew.

"Oh, uh, sure," she responded in her usual monotonous tone of voice, "I'd love to get a head start on the weekend now that I know it's the weekend." Then she laughed.

Frankie was known around the office to have a slow laugh that sounded like she was hiccuping. It was the only way anyone knew she found something amusing. She didn't politely chuckle when her coworkers said something intended to be funny, she didn't really participate in a lot of the office banter and gossip. She just kind of appeared, nodded in agreement from time to time, and went home.

James dismissed his admin, and watched Frankie practically run out of the office and down the street from the window.

Frankie wheezed and huffed as she made the mad dash to her bus. All she wanted to do was get to her air conditioned apartment, rip her adult clothes off, and dive head first into a pint of ice cream. She hooked a left and slowed her walk as she made it to the bus stop and leaned against the pole. Looking at the list of arrival times on the plexiglas terminal and then checking her watch, she knew she had made it with a minute or two to spare (assuming the bus was on time).

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A stale breeze washed over her and she could smell the usual musk of the city but also the light amber fragrance one of the women wore as she too waited for the bus. It reminded her of a cheap body mist from Target that used to be her favorite until it was discontinued. Her stomach lurched and growled at the thought of being in an air conditioned Target and briefly contemplated stopping at the one she passed on the way home before shaking her head at the thought. She tried to hear her mother's voice in her ears telling her there was food at home.

The bus pulled up and it was slightly packed. Not nearly as shoulder to shoulder as it would have been had she left work at 5:30 like she usually did, but still mostly full. There were no seats left so she walked as far back as she could and leaned against the one area without seats nearest the back door. She looked at the gray floor and at a silver balled up gum wrapper that had likely been tossed on the ground despite the small protruding garbage can.

Frankie made it a habit to never live more than a half an hour away from any job she worked. She enjoyed sleeping in as late as she could and enjoyed getting home as fast as possible. As the bus zoomed past empty stops, she looked at the red flashing letters alerting the passengers that the bus would be going express and would stop just a block away from her apartment. She sighed in relief that her commute would be even shorter and began to daydream about the strawberry ice cream that was nestled in her freezer between a bag of frozen green beans and a box of Texas Toast.

She pushed the button to alert the bus driver to pull over at the next stop and angled herself toward the door. She watched as the familiar corner store came into view.

Almost home, she thought.

The bus began to squeak to stop and she went to press on the door to let her off. The bus didn't completely stop though and as if it had forgotten it needed to, it came back up to speed and passed her stop completely. Frankie pressed the button to alert the driver to pull over and heard its light dinging, yet the bus continued to gain speed. She leaned back and stuck a hand out, knowing she should've been seen in the rearview mirror of the driver.

"Excuse me?" she called out. There was no response.

She looked around at the other passengers who seemed blissfully ignorant about the bus and its speed and its inability to stop when ordered to stop.

"Excuse me!" she called out and began to move past people to make it to the front of the bus.

Frankie led with her shoulders, neck, and head as she weaved through the bored looking passengers. None of them seemed to notice as she tapped on their shoulders or their lower backs so she could make it to the front. It felt as though she'd been trying to make it from one end of the bus for blocks.

I know I'm stoned, but I can't be this stoned, she thought, growing frustrated. Finally she made it to the bus driver, and pressed the button to pull

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over closest to his head. The bell dinged but his eyes were trained on the road like he didn't hear it.

"Sir," she said and tapped his shoulder. Normally, Frankie avoided touching others as much as possible. Especially strangers. On things like public transportation or in crowded bars it wasn't as avoidable as she wished it could be. Her friends often made comments about how she wasn't a hugger and would rag on her for potentially being a germaphobe.

The bus driver didn't respond to her voice or her light tap and she began to feel her chest tighten. By this point she was nearly a half mile from her apartment and the bus, if anything, was gaining speed.

"Excuse me, sir!" she shouted and wound both her shoulders back only to release the tension and push forward. Frankie watched as his hands maintained their firm chokehold on the steering wheel while his body heaved to the left and centered itself. Nothing about his body language revealed he'd been touched by her at all. The revving sounds of the bus speeding up, at this point going twice the speed limit, thundered through the vessel.

Frankie peered out the window and realized it wasn't even light out anymore. It looked like it was well into the night despite being an orange hazy summer glow when she left work not that long before. The streetlights were on and were guiding the path of the unstoppable vehicle but there were no other cars on the street, nor other buses. There weren't even cars parked on the side of the road there usually was. The area of the city they were in, while it sped past in streaks, was notorious for white women walking their six pound ankle biting dogs and not even they were seen meandering about the sidewalk.

At that moment, she cursed herself for eating such a large pot brownie. Of all the things that could've occurred once leaving her job, she had to have gotten on the one bus that would drag her straight into an off brand Twilight Zone.

"Can I please get off?" she whined, hoping that if she begged she'd be released.

The piggish looking bus driver turned to her then, and without decreasing speed gave her a once over. He chuckled, and shook his head in disbelief.

"Why didn't you just press the button?" he asked her. His tone was demeaning and made her feel stupid. Her cheeks and collar burned with annoyance.

Why didn't I just press the button? she thought, as if she hadn't pressed both buttons at least three times.

Frankie's brow furrowed as she stared at the fat pink man. Her mouth opened and shut as tried to prepare a sentence or a coherent thought and she looked like a fish. She knew she looked like a fish and knew the bus driver thought she looked like a fish. She was just filled with disbelief.

Finally, she took a deep breath and smoothed out her forehead.

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"Are you fucking dumb?" she asked, "or can you just not hear?" The response shocked her as much as it shocked the driver. She'd never spoken to anyone like that before.

"Am *I* fucking dumb?" he asked.

"Yeah, are *you* fucking dumb?" she doubled down.

The bus began to creak to a slower speed. The world outside the bus began to look less streaky and she could make out the definitive appearance of trees, buildings, and sidewalks.

"Who are you to call me dumb?" he shouted at her, making her flinch.

Her ears began to heat up; she knew that was the sure fire sign she was leaving frustration and entering pure anger.

"I've been pressing the 'get me the fuck off' button for the last several blocks!"

The bus was now under the speed limit as the driver became more interested in arguing than speeding through the city with no stop in sight. His eyes were now completely off the road and trained on Frankie as she shouted at him. He began to breathe heavier and a thin veil of sweat settled over his face and neck. The bus swerved in its lane and toed the line of entering the one to the right.

"Listen, lady-," he began but Frankie stuck out a hand to stop him from continuing.

"Ah! I don't want you to keep talking. I want to get off this godforsaken bus," she snapped.

The sound of light whispers and murmuring washed over Frankie. Out of her peripheral vision, she could tell the passengers, too, had come back to consciousness and were now watching her and the driver argue with each other. She rolled her eyes. She didn't have the bandwidth to care how she looked to these people. They also allowed the bus to speed out of control and past several stops.

Frankie brought her eyes back to the bus driver, crossed her arms, and waited. She prepared herself to jump out of the slower moving bus if she had to. His eyes, darker than it was outside, stared back at her. He sighed and then smirked.

"You want off? Then get off," he said and then slammed on the breaks. Her body lurched as she slammed into the coin slot that took the bus fare, wincing as a sharp jolt rushed from her hip to her armpit.

The doors swung open and she could only watch as the bus driver leaned over and gave her a tough push. She fell backward off the bus completely and landed on her purse. Frankie felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her.

From the ground she tried to gather her surroundings. From the looks of it, she was at least two neighborhoods over from her own and it would roughly be an hour long walk. No way in hell was she taking another bus. She wheezed as she crawled over to the curb, pulled herself into a seated

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position, and dug through her bag. She took out a pack of cigarettes and stuck one in between her lips, lit it, and then dug through her bag once more.

In her hand were the last two pot brownies she had left from the previous batch. After a couple more drags from her cigarette, she felt her bones groan as she stood.

Frankie looked at the brownies, perfect squares and not more than three inches by three inches. At best, they were a half inch thick. They looked harmless, wrapped in cellophane.

Then she threw them into the street and began her long quiet walk home.