

## Wilderness House Literary Review 17/3

*Michael Gray*  
**The Day After Love**

It took me two decent bars before I hit the shitty one she hadn't been to yet, looking for me. It was on the other side of town just at the city limits where the countryside began. Shorty's wasn't a place to take a proper uptown lady on a date, and if you wanted trouble with a drunk biker or railroad worker, the prospects weren't half bad there. The police had cars regular out there, keeping an eye on the joint. I went there because I figured – hoped -- she wouldn't think of it.

I slid onto a stool at the far end of the long bar where I could see the door and who was coming through it before they saw me. It was early, just a few railroad workers huddled over their whiskey shots and Bud Lights. It would be a while before the bikers began to pour in and the jukebox would get worked overtime with a mix of country and classic rock, the pool tables abused and cue balls shooting off the green felt toward windows.

I sipped an ice-cold Old Milwaukee and glanced around, keeping track of the door from time to time. That was the thing about Shorty's – the beer was always damn cold, like it had been fetched from inside a glacier. Coldest beer in town as far as I knew. The sign above the door attested to that. I'd go in every time thinking to ask what the secret was and always forgetting to ask after I sat down.

Brock was behind the bar, a tall muscled-up guy with a droopy moustache. We'd gone to high school together. That was twenty years in the past and sailing away fast over the horizon. He'd done some time for this and that, nothing major, but enough to get him a couple years. Brock kept a sawed-off pool cue behind the bar for when some biker went off the rails. He left the dried blood on it on purpose.

But usually, the biker club policed its members because they wanted to keep Shorty's as their unofficial HQ and official watering hole. It wasn't a biker club like the Hell's Angels, or that show on TV – Sons of Anarchy. It was mostly just dumb fuck unemployables on Harley's selling some weed, some coke. I think sometimes they fought just to help pass the time and reinforce their street cred. What's a biker without a fight now and again? Just another damn citizen.

The upright folks from the good parts of town were mostly afraid to go in Shorty's and that's how it should be, I figured. To each his own. Live and let live, I supposed. I figured this gal on the lookout for me would feel the same and not bother with Shorty's. I doubted she'd ever even been there. Her tastes ran to the uptown watering holes with fern plants and shiny surfaces everywhere, where the three-piece suit roamed in herds.

"Ain't seen her, man," Brock says, wiping the bar with a damp cloth, his long arms covering a lot of territory fast. His arms seem freakishly long, like Spiderman arms. He'd been a decent basketball player in school, a scholarship to some low-level college maybe waiting in the wings, but he got mixed up with the wrong crowd and that was all she wrote for hoops. He might have made a good baseball player, too. I'd seen him swing that pool cue and bark a biker's head good and solid. A homerun for sure.

"Another Old Mill, Gary?" he says after a while, him resting against the liquor cabinet behind the bar. My first few were generally free when Brock worked because I was the lawyer who'd helped reduce his sentence. I'd been generous on the fee, too. But I'm not some uptown rich yuppie lawyer in a BMW. I make enough here and there to live okay. Low-level cases and such. Divorce cases, legal documents like wills and the like. No Matlock bullshit. No Perry Mason or LA Law. My house is normal and not one of those yuppie McMansions. I'm not really out of place at a bar like Shorty's. I could afford a BMW if I wanted the payment. But I'm okay with a decent pickup truck. It doesn't look odd parked in the Shorty's lot. I've picked up a few clients at Shorty's. Like with the biker club, it's an unofficial HQ from time to time. Everybody there is used to me. There's no bullshit conversations about stocks and bonds and real estate. No asswipe yuppies with pricey shoes and hundred-dollar haircuts stealing glances at themselves in the mirror behind the bar.

I wave my empty Old Mill and Brock nods, smiles, and slides another ice-cold one in front of me, the can beaded with condensation. It's even icy to the touch. I take a long pull, the Old Mill rushing down my throat, and it's so cold it makes my head hurt a moment, but then it feels awfully sweet when the little tsunami of beer floods my stomach. For good measure, I order a shot of Jack, and it lights up my innards nicely. I feel some edge, like maybe I'm one of those surfer dudes who's caught the big wave, and nothing can touch him.

"So, what should I tell her, if she does come in, Gary?"

"Don't tell her a fucking thing, man. You haven't seen me."

Brock shrugs.

"Well, that's easy enough to remember. But I don't like lying, Gary."

"I don't like global warming, Brock, but I've accepted it."

"You're a card," he says. "Always have been."

He smirks and wipes another section of the bar.

"And always will be," I say, raising my can. "Call me the Joker."

When he comes back from serving a couple of redneck geezers at the far end of the bar, I'm ready for another Old Mill. I figure to then just go home and zone out in front of the TV. It's been a long day of reading legal horseshit that pays the mortgage but has lately bored the shit out of me. But I'm maybe ready to celebrate my victory with a nightcap at home over not being caught up to by Miss Mallory McNeill.

Impulsively, I fish a couple bills from a pocket and cruise on over to the jukebox. A good buzz requires the proper background music. Theme songs and all that. I'm now just buzzed enough for it. I play "Sweet Home Alabama," which is a bedrock choice for a place like Shorty's. It's an overplayed song anywhere else, but not at Shorty's. Mostly I just want to hear that sweet Skynrd guitar riff. Then I punch in "Won't Get Fooled Again" by The Who and "Dazed and Confused" and "Heartbreaker" by Zeppelin. And finally, "Brown Sugar" and "When the Whip Comes Down" by the Stones. That's a heavy-duty lineup of real rock with edge. You won't hear that stuff in the uptown fern bars. Uptown, the music just won't grab

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you by the balls. It's all sanitized bullshit, every song – some of that godawful rap, too -- sounding pretty much like the last one. No pizzazz—no, edge. Empty air.

Maybe that's the bottom line why I always eventually drift out to Shorty's – edge. And a great jukebox and cheap Old Mills, too. The place has just enough potential for danger that I feel more alive there than any other place. You have to remember to watch your six in Shorty's. Something might be sneaking up on you. Usually, it was just the fear that something might happen. But it happened often enough there to be a real concern. Viable danger, man – edge. Uptown, nothing ever changes in those spotless fern bars. Everyone got richer, their stories more boring than the last ones, their self-righteousness as clear as a blue sky. Hardly anyone at Shorty's had good reason to be self-righteous about anything. It was the perfect place for folks perpetually struggling with something, like bills, or love.

That's where this Miss Mallory McNeill comes into the picture. Miss Mallory is a looker and dresses to the nines. But tasteful and not too damn much gaudiness. Heels and hose and tight skirts and snug blouses pushed out by ample breasts. Long blond hair and wickedly blue eyes. Piercing eyes. Like I said – a real looker. She makes the clothes look good, I guess, and not the other way around.

But Miss Mallory McNeill is on a mission. She'd like to clip my balls, you see. Not literally. But she has professed love for me, which is always a thing to be suspicious of in this day and age. I mean, what is love anyway? Like Tina Turner sings on the jukebox, it's just a second-hand emotion. It's trickery, really, and delusion. Willful delusion. Hormones and pheromones, colliding in a wicked witches brew. I had a wife once, Jeanie, but she ran off with someone else, and that's a storyline happening all too often these days. I see it all the time in my work. I handle my share of divorces. I hear the sordid details of betrayal and deceit and affection morphed into malice and revenge. My work can be every bit as ugly, in its own way, as a Friday or Saturday night at Shorty's.

I guess what I'm saying is I don't quite trust what Miss Mallory McNeill calls love. She talks of it being real love, true love, but quickly she mentions assets and merger, saying we're both lawyers and that's a firm, really, and that means independence to be our own bosses yada yada yada. I worry that Miss Mallory McNeill defines love as commingled assets and having more "things." I think Miss Mallory McNeill is a lawyer in the shower and even in bed at night. I suspect it's a layer, like skin, she never takes off, can never strip away and step forward and be naked, open -- vulnerable. It's a cloak, a force field. Protection.

Why does Miss Mallory McNeill say she loves me? Does she? Does she even know what love is? Is it permanent with her, love? Or is it some sort of starting point, a day when a chemical reaction of sorts lines up well enough with ambition to make a suitable match? A merger? Does she need love for more than a day? I think maybe I need more. I suspect I want -- need -- something for the day after love.

I look around Shorty's. More people have drifted in: fewer railroad workers but more bikers. A few ladies in tight jeans and midriff-baring

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tops, hair done up nice, and hoop earrings dangling. Ladies looking, as the song goes, for love in all the wrong places.

Another bartender has come on shift to help Brock out. I decide to drink some more. To get drunker. I know that if it comes to it, Brock will call me a cab and make sure nobody messes with my truck. He'll always feel he owes me something for my help. But I long ago stopped trading on that. I think maybe Brock and I are still friends. Not like back in school. But friends of a sort. Or good acquaintances. Fellow crew members in a lifeboat floating in the endless, choppy sea at Shorty's.