

Wilderness House Literary Review 17/4

Arthur Davis
Ronnald

"My name is Ronnald. I'm a busboy here," he said, preparing for the right moment to approach Delores, the new cabaret singer at the Golden Slipper, where he worked.

Her voice spoke to him and took hold of his heart, making it difficult for him to breathe, or reason. It was deep and melodious, venting the suffering and beauty of her spirit. Ronnald also noticed the way just the right parts of her body curved out of her skin-tight gown.

It was after these nights of feeling so close to his love, especially after she sang "Melancholy Baby" or "My Own True Love," that he was inspired to go out into the street and lift busses and trucks, and whatever vehicle he wished, over his head, even more effortlessly than usual.

Of course, he made sure to put them down without further frightening any of the passengers. Then, under a tapestry of ornately incandescent clouds, he disappeared back into the night from where he had come.

On one such evening, he lifted a fully loaded truck from Slimcoil's Coal Yard—they painted their trucks a recognizable bright red and blue—at the corner of South Durante and Berle.

Walter Lincoln stood across the street with his newspapers that night, having not sold one that day, or any previous day, and was quite amazed to see the unassuming, clearly uninspiring, apparition of a young man his age, height, and weight handily lift such a formidable object.

Lumps of coal rained down over the sides of the truck as the wheels spun wildly underneath, piercing the night with an unearthly, high-pitched whine. Several lumps rolled into the gutter at Walter's feet. He quickly picked them up and jammed them into his tattered pockets.

Ronnald was only eight when he first realized he could lift heavy objects, such as his older sister when she tried to stamp out his collection of tin toy trucks. After she freed herself from his grasp, she called their mother into the fray to wreak vengeance on the "brother from hell," as she insisted on calling him.

"Did you lift your sister over your head and spin her round and round?" his mother asked.

"That's silly," Ronnald said, though inwardly his imagination quickened with the potential of his new discovery. "I'm just a little kid."

"There now, the both of you, that's settled," his mother said and returned to her crocheting.

His sister bent down with fire in her eyes and glared menacingly at him. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you," she said, her fists clenched white at her sides. "And there's only one 'n' in Ronnald, no matter what you say."

Apparently adding an additional letter to his first name drove his sister crazy. That was reason enough. "Well," he began, "there are Ronalds, and then there is Ronnald."

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Walter watched, mesmerized, as Ronald lowered the Slimcoil's truck back down to the pavement. There was a moment of chill silence, as if the world was holding its breath in anticipation of the next revelation.

Finally, the shocked driver got out, scratching his head in confusion. He walked around the truck, passing Ronald twice without questioning him, but couldn't make out what had happened.

The driver had heard rumors that strange occurrences were possible in this part of the city, but since the police dismissed the reports of rising and falling vehicles as a practical joke, even though such epiphanies were invariably preceded by colorfully aberrant cloud formations, he accepted the fact that what had happened to him was simply not possible.

After a little more head scratching, he got back into his truck, drained off the remains of a bottle of Rumson's Rot-Gut Whisky he'd been nibbling away at all night, and drove off.

Ronald bent down and picked up one of the chunks of coal that Walter had missed and launched it after the truck. Had the driver not deliberately passed through a red light at the intersection of Jerusalem and East Cornbluth streets, the airborne fossil would, most certainly, have landed squarely on top of his load.

A cloud composed of equal measures of crimson and onyx black water crystals erupted in the sky. It twisted and spiraled off for over a quarter of a mile then simply disappeared as was its original intention.

Ronald brushed the dark stain from his hands, heaved a deep sigh, and wondered if Delores was thinking of him at just that moment. Of course she wasn't, he concluded.

When the street was clear, Walter came over. "Say there," he said, "that's not half bad."

Ronald was still bemoaning his plight, the reality that he might never work up enough courage to approach Delores, when he noticed Walter. He was not thrilled to have his lamentation interrupted. He had planned to spend the rest of the night walking about, lifting and wallowing and lifting and wallowing in his much deserved, besotted state of self-pity.

"I've lifted more," he said and began to move off.

"Do you only lift coal trucks?"

Ronald knew he was partial to Slimcoil's only because he always had trouble spelling the name. No one had ever asked him questions about his lifting. The few who had noticed more often than not ran off into the night clasping their heads in their hands as if their eyes had betrayed them and their brains were on fire.

"No."

"Does it make any difference to your lifting if the night sky is pink or green, or rippled with shades of dusky gray, or faintly flecked with wavy strands of peach and umber?"

Ronald considered the question. He had noticed that the night sky took on different shades of light and dark, of texture and tone, right before

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and after he lifted vehicles, but what this pimply, ill-clad lad was implying simply didn't make sense. "No, I don't think so."

"Look," Walter said, pointing to the luminous night sky. "It's roiling with a sudden incandescent fever. Pillars of majestic colors swirl and swoon, mix and refashion themselves into distinct interwoven cloud patterns."

"Anyone can see that," Ronald said, quickly committing Walter's eloquent description to memory in case he ever got the chance to impress Delores.

Walter had been pitched out on the streets by his parents from as far back as he could recall but never witnessed a celestial spectacle as grand as this. Then he remembered he couldn't recall the last time he had eaten and quickly returned to the opportunity at hand.

"You know I could get you a job at the circus, or even at one of the swankier clubs in town and make a bundle. With me as your manager, you could make a killing. You could be rich and famous, but only if you follow my advice and work extra especially hard and never once question what I tell you to say or do."

"I already have a good job," he said, recalling what people had said of him over the years. "A master of movement and hand speed, of depth perception and dexterity," was his favorite customer review.

When he was in one of his really productive moods, he could work the night shift clearing and cleaning all the tables at two clubs at the same time.

"You could make more. With my help, you could make a lot more."

"Could I earn enough to impress a certain cabaret singer?" Ronald's heart pounded with the sudden possibility.

"Hey, kid, cabaret singers are a dime a dozen, and their only interested in the wad in your wallet or the one in your pants. But with my brains and your back, you could have any cabaret singer in town, including that delicious new back-up babe with the voice of an angel. What's her name? You know, the brunette with the exotic, smoky, dark eyes, seductively pouting lips and amazing body over at the Golden Slipper?"

Ronald sensed that this fellow was on the square as soon as he heard the name Golden Slipper. "Then I'll do it."

Walter threw his stack of newspapers into the trash can. Within a week, his bespectacled protégé was the toast of the town, enjoying a level of notoriety that banished the event of Warren Harding's death to the back of newspapers, though no one seemed to take notice anyway.

Ronald was the featured act in three cabaret shows and an instant star attraction at Bigsby & Boggs' Traveling Circus. He worked hard, lifting cars and vans and trucks and busses way, way, way over his head seven nights a week with the greatest of ease. The crowds roared their approval and showered his performances with coin and cash.

The more he lifted, the less he saw Delores, the sadder he became. He knew he would have to sacrifice seeing her now for the possibility of

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finally being able to impress her later.

It was all that kept him sane.

He never really understood contracts and business, so it never occurred to him to question the substance of Walter's promotional expenses, or to think that he was only getting a small portion of what seemed to be a tremendous income. He knew Walter was handicapped, as was everybody else, by not being able to lift vehicles over their head, and he was willing to make certain concessions for those less advantaged.

There was so much money and he had won such instant fame that cabaret singers from every corner of the city, then the state, and then the country, were camped out at his doorstep, all of them scheming to get his attention.

Walter, who decided to temporarily keep his last name because it was obviously bringing him good fortune, spent his days counting the money that flowed in from Ronald's previous night's efforts. Everything was going swell.

Walter muttered, "Swell" when he finished off each thousand-dollar stack of bills. He wrapped each thick wad of bills with rubber bands that had once bound his newspapers together.

By late morning, there were always two piles of money. Each reached up from the kitchen table in his squalid quarters to the corroded tin ceiling overhead. One pile was for him, in payment for his idea and his valued services.

The other pile waited for Ronald who, more often than not, forgot to show up to collect his share, so deep was his debilitating grief at having little spare time anymore to hear Delores sing at the Golden Slipper.

Walter took this sign as a telling omen, and being as he was an aspiring religious zealot—mostly because such figures drew mystic attention to themselves and their words were more respected than that of any mere newsboy—he concluded that God didn't want Ronald to have the money so he secreted much of it away for himself.

One night, a score of scantily clad cabaret singers were pursuing Ronald. "Hey, Ronald!" they yelled out as a chorus, "How about us? Take us."

"No, take me," a lusting blonde with legs that seemed to go on forever pleaded, unzipping the front of her flimsy costume.

"No, me," a standout brunette demanded. She was wearing gleaming red shoes so spiked it made her look as though she were standing on her tiptoes. Ronald liked spiked red shoes but wasn't especially interested in the brunette.

"I'm better for you than all of them put together," the tall redhead squawked hysterically. "I know how to treat a man like you."

But Ronald didn't hear their aching incantations. A small van passed close by. The moon's yellow seal slipped through a chink in the rippling plaid overcast.

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"You know, it's not like that Delores is good enough for you anyway," one girl with a nest of bright blue feathers embedded in her hair, voiced jealously.

This time Ronnald turned and confronted the mob of half-crazed women. "What did you say?"

They were startled by his response.

"Who said that?"

The girl with the blue feathers finally came forward. "I'm sorry, but you know Delores Jennings is the only cabaret singer in town who has not fallen desperately in love with you, and that's because she's not really a cabaret singer at heart like we are."

The thicket of young women murmured their collective agreement. They were eager, desperate in fact, just to draw his attention, even if it meant effecting a cruel deception, something that was specifically prohibited in their union contract.

Shaking at the possibility, he asked, "She's not?"

"Not really," the girl confirmed, now feeling less threatened.

"No, she really isn't," added another, undecided as to whether or not it was a good time to tear off the top of her ornate costume and throw herself at Ronnald's feet.

He didn't know which truth to address: the one dealing with Delores' passion or her profession. "Then what is she?" Ronnald asked, more distressed than ever.

The blonde stepped forward, her gown folded down around her waist, exposing her breasts. She had an extraordinarily debilitating crush on Ronnald.

"Well, during the day, she is a tap dancing instructor at Tony Lester's Tip-Tap-Toe Dance Studio, and a lace-weaver wherever she can get work. She only sings at night at the Golden Slipper in order to pay for medication for her sick grandmother."

"She's very nice that way," one of the girls revealed, mostly out of guilt.

Ronnald had heard of Tony Lester's Studio. If Delores was an instructor there, she had to be even more special than he had first imagined. He suddenly wondered if he was worthy of her. "Of course," he said.

"So you see, she's not one of us," a determined voice from the back of the crowd insisted.

"You all have to go now," Ronnald said in the faintest of whispers as questions, doubts, indecision, revelations, and consuming sadness possessed him.

The poor, poor girl, he thought. His great-great-grandmother on his father's side had been a lace-weaver in Austria. What a wonderfully strange coincidence. He knew that his Delores must be an even more wonderful girl.

He had to go to her and reassure her that everything would be all

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right. He would redouble his lifting efforts. "I'll work matinees on Wednesdays and Sundays to help pay for medication for her grandmother. If all else fails, I'll ask Walter for an advance on my future income."

The sky over the city quickly changed from a faint undulating wash of fuchsia and cobalt blue to a solid overcast of mint green and magenta. That was his favorite cloud combination.

He suddenly grew excited by the possibilities before him. He knew if he could save Delores, he could save himself. He was delirious with expectation and waved his hands frantically overhead, as though he had just lifted the heaviest object there was.

An empty city bus came lumbering down the street in Ronald's direction. The driver was so caught up in the colored transfusion in the turbulent night sky that he never saw the slight fellow dancing round and round in his headlights, or felt the sickening impact of fender against flesh.

When Ronald woke, broken and bloody from the accident, he begged the bus driver to take him to the Golden Slipper. They arrived just in time to catch Delores coming out of the stage door clutching a packet of the finest lace.

She immediately recognized the crumpled figure kneeling against the doorway.

Her eyes flamed with desire, then faded with despair. Her voice choked with distress. Her heart stopped and broke in that very same moment. This was not how she had envisioned their first real encounter. She had been in love with this boy since the beginning.

It may have been her natural fear of rejection that had kept her from letting him know how she felt. It may have been the fact that he generated an unpredictable electric intensity in the Golden Slipper that she found disconcerting. It may have been the fact that she wasn't really a cabaret singer, which held her back from exposing her true feelings.

"I love the way you sing," Ronald said, barely able to speak from the terrible pain that wracked his battered and broken body.

The sky crackled and flashed with distant thunder. A whirlwind of mint green and magenta clouds swept across the horizon, punctuating the heavens with their approval. The chill of the evening evaporated into a tender, healing, tropical breeze.

"Oh, you poor, poor darling," she lamented and clasped him to her full, fragrant bosom. "I'll take you home and nurse you back to health. You'll be fine. You'll see."

Ronald was thrilled with her loving attentiveness and forgot to mention the introduction he had worked so hard to craft. "Well, okay. But only if it's not too much of a bother."