

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/2

Bartłomiej Boryczka
Wes

"I've got a headache. *Please* keep your voices down!" Mrs. Macquire, seated at her overflowing desk, instructed our fourth-grade class in her always tired, nasal voice.

We were awaiting the bell with impatience, but with nowhere near as much impatience as we were awaiting summer.

I was the only one that sat silently, with my eyes on the clock bouncing my knee and doodling a dragon in my agenda planner. My knee was restless because I had plans to hang out with a boy named Wes after school. At the time I wasn't hanging out much with anyone since I didn't play video games, wasn't much for sports. And catching frogs while adventuring in the woods stopped being cool about a year ago, but above all I was shy and guarded. Everyday though I was practicing skateboarding, with the hidden hope that I would find some skateboarder buddies. But other than being excited I was also nervous because the reason Wes wanted to hang out was to fight, and I wasn't exactly sure what kind of a fight he meant.

Wes proposed the fight, earlier in the day, at the end of lunch. The sky was clear; the air was crisp and still. I had just finished playing a phenomenal round of foursquare and was about to go inside, when Wes walked by restless and said to absolutely no one, "I want to fight someone. Anyone down to fight?"

"I'll fight you," I replied without a second thought, smiling and thinking it'll just be a friendly tussle, then I debated if it was some weird joke that went over my head. Others around me seemed oblivious to the invitation to fight but a few kids smiled with apprehension.

"Uhh, O-kay. I'll meet you at your house," Wes said surprised, then added, "just don't go crying to your mom after. You seem like the kind of kid who tells his mom everything."

"Bro, no way! I swear I won't tell."

As an honest gesture I offered to bring my boxing gloves, which sometimes my dad and I messed around with, but Wes said to leave them behind, just no face shots. Jerome and Aliyah, who like Wes I only knew a little from school, overheard the conversation and Jerome chuckled and asked, "Yo Ray, are you gonna kick his ass?"

"Of course." I replied with a smile.

"Boys are always wanting to fight." Alyah commented with disapproval.

"Yeah it's fun." Jerome said.

"It's a good workout." I spewed out quickly, then blushed.

"Well cool if we come to watch?" Jerome asked.

"Yeah! I'll give you my address."

Wes was bright and amiable, (well most of the time.) Everyone in

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school knew that Wes had some anger issues. Back in second grade, Wes had a habit of snapping colored pencils, #2 pencils and crayons over his forehead when he was frustrated. Coincidentally in the same year, his older cousin who was in high school, Stan, snapped, and he broke two classmates' noses' in the back of the school bus fracturing his own knuckle in the process.

The fight was over before I even knew it started. I was sitting in the front of the bus and all I heard over the din of chatter was some sudden shouting in the back and then a few curses. Stan's fight on the bus was the only time I ever saw the chill bus driver, Steve, screech the bus to a stop, demand order in a booming stern voice and threaten punishment but then in the end he only gave a "first and final warning." Afterwards, I tried to find out what the big fight was about, but I never did.

Stan got off the bus with Wes until he graduated high school, they lived together for at least a few years. They didn't talk much, which wasn't surprising as Stan was eight years older and had the meanest looking eyes I've ever seen. After they hopped off the school bus, I often thought how grateful I was that I didn't live with someone like Stan and that my older cousin, who sometimes babysat me. The time we had, was great and lots of fun; for one thing he would make treasure hunts.

So, Wes's anger was starting to worry me just a little before our fight. I remembered that back in the first grade a kid named Denis taunted Wes for being a ginger chicken, who's too scared to jump off the top of the slide onto the wood chips. Wes became madder than hell and launched a fat stick at Dennis' temple. Dennis lost so much blood he became pale and almost passed out. Then again, I wasn't worried about being hurt in my upcoming fight, since I had no beef with Wes, and I thought afterwards maybe he'll want to skateboard.

In fact, right after the fight plans were arranged at recess, I spent the rest of the day looking forward to our harmless tussle, like how in winter Fernando and I would try to push each other off the snowbanks when we played king of the hill during lunch, until a teacher would give us a couple days detention after a few ignored warnings. However, as the day progressed I grew more worried, but I pushed the worry out of my mind thinking my nerves were probably just some social anxiety, because this was my first time hanging out with Wes.

Finally, the bell rang. I said, "see you later," to Jerome, who was in my homeroom, then I threw my notebook in my bag, bolted out of school faster than usual, pounced on my bike and peddled the two miles home as fast as I could. I arrived home winded and sweaty.

"How was school?" my mom asked.

"O-kay. I'm uh going to hang out with a friend later. He's going to come here." I tried to play it cool, but I heard my voice come out a little tremulous with anxiety.

"Oh, nice! What friend?"

"Wes... and maybe some others."

"Sounds fun! I think I remember you telling me something about Wes."

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Please be safe!"

"Mo-om, of course!"

My mom smiled with pursed lips in response.

Dinner was breaded chicken with dill mashed potatoes and a spinach tomato salad. All the vegetables were from my dad's garden, and I helped pick some of the tomatoes the day before. I was hungry and was the first one done eating. As soon as I put my dishes in the sink, I heard some light knocks on the door. Jerome and Aliyah came over on their bikes, but Wes was nowhere in sight.

"Where's Wes?" I asked.

"We're goin' to his house." Jerome said.

I grabbed the inhaler off my desk and dashed off on my bike following Aliyah and Jerome. While biking Aliyah smirked at me with glee and curiosity. "Good luck with your fight," she said.

"Y-y-yeah . . ." I stammered, beaming. *Damn, I should've said thanks, I thought a minute later.*

In about fifteen minutes we made it to nice tan brick two-story apartments. My palms turned clammy when Jerome began to knock in rapid succession on Wes's door, and I thought maybe this was a bad idea and I should leave, but I was committed, it was too late now. The Wes that swung open the door seemed to be a different Wes than the one I knew from school. He was serious and concentrated, as though mimicking his older cousin and the fighters he'd seen on T.V. He greeted Jerome with a fist pump, nodded to Aliyah, and when he saw my bashful smile and hand waving in aloof enthusiasm, he took on a mocking grin.

"What's up, Ray. Let's get this over with before my mom gets back."

"Uh, so we're not going to the park?"

"No, we'll do it here, on the front lawn."

"Uh, okay, I guess."

There was not a cloud in the sky and the sun's rays warmed deep. Jerome was the referee, he stood between Wes and me. He held some authority since he was the tallest and strongest boy in our grade and the best at basketball. Aliyah sat at full attention criss-crossed on the grass.

"Okay, no face shots and no nut shots." Jerome said and glanced at me with a sympathetic narrow-eyed look.

Wes and I were about the same height and build, but the anger in Wes's light blue eyes became evident to all three of us, an obvious advantage. I smiled the friendliest smile I could manage with my left cheek going up as high as it could. Wes scowled back and stared down at his shoes.

"Fight!" Jerome yelled as he stepped away.

I expected wrestling for a take-down and lunged forward trying to take Wes down by the knees, but he slithered out in an instant and, with all his strength, punched my gut, the wind was knocked out of me. My body bent in half like a lawn chair, and I was gasping for air. Wes was

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indifferent or oblivious, put me in a headlock and slugged me in the stomach again, and again, and again.

The referee, Jerome, decided the fight was over. "Okay, that's good!" He hollered.

Wes didn't seem to hear. He hit me in the gut once more. I felt like I was drowning in fists. Until Jerome leapt forward, snatched Wes from behind with both arms and yanked him off me like a father scooping up his tantruming child. Tears stung my eyes, and I rested my hands on my knees. My diaphragm was spasming and everything hurt. I was unable to understand why Wes was so relentless, but he calmed down fast and told Jerome to let him go. Once he was free, Wes's eyes retained that kind somber expression I was used to seeing in school.

"Sorry dude, I thought you knew what was up," Wes said, shaking his head.

"Agh, *Fuck!* I thought we were just gonna wrestle! You hit me in the nuts!" I snarled, trying to regain some face.

"No way!" Wes protested, then argued back, "dude, you should've asked *before* how we're fighting, and I thought you wanted to box since you asked about bringing boxing gloves?"

"Jeez, Ray, are you okay?" Aliyah asked with concern.

"Ye-ah, I-I-I'm just, just okay. I-I-I just, I just need a minute," I whimpered, as I tried to hold back tears but then gave in and let some flow.

"You alright, man? Do you want some water?" Wes asked with a sudden tender voice that threw me off guard.

"Ye-es." I said, with my breath already almost back to normal, but I was pretending to still be in pain and out of breath, so I stayed bent over with my hands on my knees.

Wes went inside and came back with a plastic water bottle. After I wiped my eyes and chugged some water, I remembered I had my inhaler. For dramatic effect, I tore it out of my pocket as though my life depended on it and took two deep puffs.

"You have asthma? Alyah asked.

"Yeah, just a little." I answered.

Then Jerome asked, "does that do anything if you take it a bunch of times?"

"I don't know. I don't think so," I said.

"Can I try?"

So, I gave Jerome my inhaler and to everyone's amusement he puffed it about ten times. Then I inhaled it several more times to join the fun. After a few minutes of chatting, for the most part about how Jerome's bike didn't have brakes, he said that he felt the inhaler hits, although he seemed sober, but after he said he felt something, I started to think I was feeling a little funny, but I was just high from repressed anger, confusion and adrenaline, but not the Albuteral.

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"Let's go to the park." Jerome suggested.

We all agreed this was a great idea and set off. At the nearby park we had a blast riding our bikes down the steep side of a large grassy hill that led into the baseball field. We tried to see how far we could go before our bike's stopped without hitting the brakes. Jerome, who had the bike without breaks and who invented the game, rolled the furthest by far, all the way by the woods behind the baseball field.

And Wes and I were getting along decent after our "fight," although we were awkward and quiet towards each other and didn't talk much with Jerome and Aliyah either. Wes and I tried not to look directly in each other's eyes, and we didn't say anything to each other, until I decided to speak up while waiting near home plate for Jerome and Aliyah to bike down the hill. I knew Wes skateboarded and I told him I had just started to learn. I told him I had a Mongoose board. He said he has a Plan-B board and that it's harder to ollie on a Wal-Mart board, because they're heavier. So, that's how I learned that a Mongoose skateboard is the same as a Wal-Mart skateboard. I turned red with embarrassment and jealousy, although when I was recently gifted the skateboard by my parents for my birthday, I was giddy with excitement and could hardly sleep that night.

After our game of biking down the hill, we biked over to a nearby Sherwin-Williams, and Wes decided to buy two cans of spray-paint for us to decorate the park. We colored a large unused concrete pipe that was on the edge of the pond by the baseball field. There were few people at the park and either way the pipe was out of sight so we wouldn't get in any trouble. In half-foot size letters, I painted "ASS BUCKET" in purple.

The sun's rays were beginning to elongate, and the day was starting to grow cooler as dusk approached. A short while after our juvenile graffiti, Wes said he had to go home, because he still had to eat dinner. Then Jerome and Aliyah said they had to go home too. We biked together to the stop sign, I said, "peace out, see you guys later," and I went my separate way.

The bike ride home I spent brooding, thinking about how I got my ass beat, and when I arrived home, I was quiet and sullen. I didn't say a word about my fight, which I wanted to forget as soon as possible, I just said that we biked around and hung out at the park. Then I complained of being tired and having a headache, shuffled up to my room and read a book about pirates. Cozy and under my covers I fell asleep with a chapter on Blackbeard open on my chest and my night table light still on.

I said almost nothing to Wes after our fight, and a few weeks later Wes moved across town and went to a different school. Once he moved, I thought that was the last I'd see of him, but then the summer before seventh grade, my last year of trying to skateboard, I was skating with two friends at the park by my house and was surprised to find Wes by himself in the gazebo, doing kickflips and heelflips off of a picnic table and chain smoking cigarettes. It was five years since I last saw him. He looked the same, only older and somehow wiser. This time I wasn't jealous of his skateboard since last Christmas my parents bought me a better and more expensive skateboard, but I was envious of how good he was at skateboarding.

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The whole time Wes was kind, yet his eyes were exuding an aura of heavy darkness. I went over to say 'hi', and after talking a bit I could tell that he was trying hard to be pleasant and felt silly about the scuffle we had, but neither of us brought up that childish fight. When my two friends were off exploring the woods, he offered me a cigarette. I hesitated but took it to seem tough and cool, I almost coughed up a lung. He laughed, then locked eyes with me and said with a smirk, "sounds like maybe you shouldn't smoke."

I asked him, "if it's bad for you, why do you do it?"

"Why not," he said with a defiant look, gazing at a cloud.

"Because it's not healthy."

"Well, it's really not *that* bad. Them saying it's bad for you is just a marketing thing, Cheetos and McDonalds are just as bad, if not worse. But anyway, no one's ever fully healthy and it helps with my nerves." He replied with a small shrug of his shoulders as he looked at me a little unsure.

I was certain Cheetos and McDonalds were not as bad as cigarettes, but I didn't say anything.

Then Wes peered down at his cigarette as though it was the first one he's ever seen and said, "also my Dad died in a car accident when I was seven. He was killed by a drunk driver. When something like that happens you realize that life's fucked up and you might as well do what you want."

"Oh, that must've been really hard."

"It happens," he looked at me a little saddened and perturbed.

Then I was startled, so I jumped and turned around when I heard.

"Waddup!" and "Yo we saw an owl!"

It was my two friends hollering as they returned from the woods. After discussing owls and wildlife, we all attempted to pop an ollie off a row of picnic tables but only Wes was able to, sticking the landing almost every time. Wes was skating a lot better than me and my friends and, after our short chat, he was kind enough to give us helpful tips on how to improve our stance, ollie, kickflip, and pop shuv-it. He said, "you guys just started out, keep going at it and you'll get better. The beginning is always the hardest." Then he popped an ollie clean over the tennis net, nailed the landing and asked while coasting over, "yo Ray, can I ollie over you?"

I looked at the tennis net, didn't hesitate much and answered, "sure dude, why not."

Before he pushed off, he took a massive last hit from the Marlboro that rested steady between his calm fingers, hacked a lougie and crushed the stub with foot, while I laid on my back, my forehead covered with sweat. He was rolling over fast on his Plan-B skateboard, the sound grew thunderous until, *Pop!* And he was high over my abdomen and coasting smooth on the other side. And that was the last time I saw Wes.

A few days later, I was shocked and thrown into disbelief while eating Fruity Pebbles on a sunny Saturday morning when I recognized Wes's

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older cousin, Stan, in black-and-white, in the newspaper obituary section. He had just turned twenty-one. As I said earlier, Stan was older than Wes by about eight years, lived with him for at least three years, and broke his knuckles in a big fight on the bus with two other guys when he was in high school, and I was in the second grade. From the little I remember and saw of him on the bus, his eyes always seemed to be on the hunt for violence, but in the newspaper photo he looked kind and somber like his cousin Wes.

There was no reason given for Stan's death, but a few days later I learned what happened from a skateboarding friend of Wes's that went to my school. What happened is Stan found out his roommate slept with his girlfriend, so he drank himself blind and snorted some coke. Then when his roommate came home from work, he greeted the luckless lover by shooting him in the heart with a pistol, then Stan injected heroin into his forearm and drove off in a frenzy. The next day his empty car, with keys in the ignition and driver door open, was found on a bridge over Lake Superior.

I also learned from my buddy that Wes, at fourteen, moved to L.A. and was already being sponsored by some big skate companies. Finding these things out made me realize I understood nothing or even less than nothing about another's life unless I have felt or feel somewhat similar, and even then, you can only understand so much.

At the breakfast table I asked my dad why he thought Wes's older cousin Stan did those nightmarish acts of violence. Staring deep into his coffee and with a strong but sorrowful voice he said, "sounds like he was a fucked up, stupid kid, although no one can ever really say why." While my mom looked straight in my eyes and added with a sad quiver, "only God knows, but maybe part of it was because he was scared and sick and lost sight of the light."

That night I had trouble falling asleep. I kept thinking about Stan. I kept thinking about the fact that someone who I saw every day on the bus for three years was a killer, and then I fell into a spiraling pit of deep despair as I thought about the imaginable and unimaginable terror in the world. But then I thought about my newest crush, the new girl in middle school Davia, and after a few minutes, I was lulled to sleep by mellow music through headphones from my MP3 player, and the next morning I forgot all about my sadness, but, still sometimes, when I'm alone at night and everything's seems in good order, this sad heavy overwhelmed feeling returns but, thank God, listening to music almost always helps.

And the girl who watched Wes deliver blows to my gut in the fourth grade, Aliyah, went to the same middle and high school as me. We only spoke a few times, just a few words in class or the hallway, and none of those words were about Jerome or Wes and our long ago, foolish fight.