

Wilderness House Literary Review 18/3

Charles Hayes
Big Wheel

I WAS NEWLY DISCHARGED FROM THE MILITARY and wanted nothing to do with society at large. Any ambition that I may have had before had died in the military, along with most of my empathy. But I had to eat. After my separation benefits ran out I gave up my rented room and started to drift in and out of the hill country, picking up jobs where I could find them. And with jobs came parts of society. Eventually I came to work for a large farm in the Appalachian foothills where a local girl worked part time. Mostly I worked in the field while she worked in the packing shed. But at our noon meals we sat next to each other. That was the beginning as our eyes talked with our mouths full.

Olivia was a nice small town girl with exceptional looks and an openness, trust, and unchallenged confidence that fit my closed heart and smartly healed scars like a tongue and groove joint. A couple of years out of high school, she hadn't been around much and didn't seem to care. She just couldn't place herself in the populace of most of her peers, had no desire for a "higher" education, and was reluctant to follow just any beat or hop any wagon just because most others did. In a word she was different. But she was a good person and, though different, held no animosity for the mainstream. She simply chose discriminately when or when not to enter it. And when it came to romance, for one reason or another, I guess she chose to stand at the edge. Perhaps it was her place for further study. However she was more than ready. She came my way easy enough to tell that she was no big fan of the local selection when it came to dating. I considered myself lucky to be around.

In my small cottage that came with the job, Olivia would poke fun at my seeming shyness, not seeing it for the hard edge that it was. Maybe we all see in others those things that make us tick. She liked 'bringing me all the way out,' as she put it. It made her feel the primal power of herself, a heady awakening for her young years, I suppose. It was easy to not look for broken things about one another. She couldn't see the loner in me. She simply wrote off my standoffishness to rebellion. That, along with the few years that I held on her, put her at ease. For a young woman who was tired of being alone I was an easy pick. But she simply missed the real aloofness of my nature, wishfully ascribing it to things that would work out over time and become dependably steady. Though I advised her that I was not that sort of guy, I went at our relationship like no pain could ever come of it. I played into her needs for the most part and allowed them to grow....until she became pregnant.

Near the end of the harvest with the steep hardwoods turning brilliant colors around us, our evening let downs in my cottage subsided a bit. Sensing that my ardor had sobered some and literally beginning to feel the consequences of our naked romps, Olivia often decided to return to her little studio over the drugstore in the nearby town of Thornton. We still enjoyed being together but the sense of fun and freedom that we had previously enjoyed was absent. And the working season, along with our income, was about to end. I had always planned on simply moving on at that point.

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Olivia did not make the usual demands of a mother to be. She thought that was for 'old' people. Her lack of bitterness surprised me some, but I thanked my stars just the same. She came from a well off family not far away and, while they were pissed to the gills at me, they did not intend to let her go it alone. She could return home and have the baby. And I could go on being who I was....with just another son of a bitch tag flapping in my wake.

The last time that we were together, clearing out my cottage after getting paid, Olivia was not showing yet....except when she removed her clothes. Then, the slightest little rise of tummy could be seenand felt. Her smooth skin under my calloused hand and her bold expression holding mine all seemed part of an erotica that enhanced our coupling, our goodbye. The deeper sensations that ran to the new look in Olivia's eyes, as if she were seeing me in another way, were the things that I was too coarse to see.

Buoyed by our sex and thinking that I should oil this departure with some optimism I looked to Olivia as she lay on the bed staring afar.

"Hey darling, that was great. You're always great. You're going to make some lucky guy very happy."

Continuing to stare and in a voice that was eerily remote, Olivia replied, "You think so, Peter?"

Sensing that this was not about to go where I wanted, I tried again.

"I know so babe. I'll never forget the times we've had. You're a special lady no doubt."

Sitting up on the edge of the bed, Olivia started putting her clothes on as if she were somewhere else.

"I suppose I should thank you for saying that, Peter. It seems that you would know, but I just can't get it out right now."

"No problem Olivia, my pleasure," I said with a grin. "I'm sure you already know how nice you are and don't need me telling you."

"Why is that, Peter?"

"Because you've obviously heard it before."

Standing to button her blouse, Olivia seemed to inventory the walls of the little cottage.

"I see," she said.

A little put off and confused by the detached way that Olivia was responding to our split or maybe just plain insulted by her reflection of an attitude that was usually reserved for me, I went on.

"Do you? You act as if I was your first."

Not moved an iota, Olivia picked up her hand bag, went to the door and opened it. While I sat naked on the bed watching, she looked through me one more time and said, "You were my first. Goodbye, Peter."

Watching the door close and feeling the sudden vacuum, I was at a loss to grasp what had just happened. Or maybe I just pretended ignorance.

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But I smiled anyway.

I left Thornton on a Greyhound out of the Appalachians to Cleveland and transferred to another bus for Seattle and the emerald glitter of Puget Sound. Through the many hours of passing through the broad expanses of the West and the rugged climbs of mountain ranges so new and high compared to my ancient Appalachians, I sometimes thought of Olivia and the way that she had retreaded me. For this I felt a spark of luck and hoped for her the same.

Jobs were not hard to find in Seattle. A lot of the tech industry was coming north out of California and that was bringing all the side work that usually surrounded it, mostly construction. I got into the laborer's union and that kept me in work and allowed me to set up my own little place near the waterfront. It was more expensive than most of the other areas but I was making good money and the supply of nice legs and tight buns was good. All the cruise ships for the inter-island passage up to Alaska would dock near my place and that brought tourists from all over. Many were skirts just looking for a brief hook-up. Hell, I lived there, part of the well known waterfront Public Market you might say. But that got old after a few seasons. I was no longer busting the first years of adulthood and I yearned for something a little more. Something more placid and permanent. For the first time I realized that I was going to break thirty and that it wouldn't hurt to break that barrier with someone to scout the new lay of the land with. As luck, or more likely karma, would have it, that was about the time I met Anna.

Anna, a quiet, unobtrusive 27 year old Pilates instructor, could have been a model. Tall and slender, with the form and definition of an aerobic athlete, she had immigrated from St. Petersburg, Russia when she was 20 along with her husband, a wealthy Russian entrepreneur who was later killed in an auto accident. Anna taught classes at the gym just down the street from my apartment. It kept her grounded and got her out of her skyline digs atop one of the nicer buildings near mine. Other than that Anna led a pretty normal existence, dating occasionally but not often, and shopping daily with the rest of the crowd at the Public Markets nearby. She particularly liked the Fisherman's Market where huge salmon were literally slung like javelins from one worker to another so the tourists could get a picture. Some of the best seafood in the world was to be had there... for a price. But that was no matter to Anna. Often, afterwards, she would spend time in the bayside park watching the activity on Elliot Bay and nearby Harbor Island with its many piers.

The air was crisp and clean as I stood by the tall American Native totem watching two or three tugs push a huge container ship toward its slip for unloading. The scene reminded me of how ants worked a big piece of food toward a better place to eat. All things hustling to get by. I was tired of it. I needed a break. The city, while it gave me good money, was starting to rub.

Just killing some off time, I looked South for the familiar behemoth of a clear day, Mt. Rainer. That's when I saw her, groceries at her side, as she sat on a bench and watched the same things as I. Her long blonde locks were tied back in more of a mane than a tail. She was nice! Her color, the hair, the way the light came off them, it was all real, no dye, no pancake.

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As she stood up, she tipped over one of her grocery bags, spilling a load of fruit over the walk. On the spot in a heartbeat, I began picking up the fruit. Locked by the luster of her pale blue eyes over an amused twist of full lips, I missed the bag a couple of times, sending the fruit back to the sidewalk. She laughed and helped me to finally get things resituated. It was almost slapstick but maybe it broke the melancholy for both of us. I know it did for me. I couldn't help it, my controlling self seemed to dissolve. I simply spoke.

"You're beautiful."

Continuing to smile while she did a quick appraisal, Anna spoke in a voice that had an edge of the colder regions of the earth. Her English was as good as my hill twang, and a perfect match for her cool beauty.

"Thank you," she said. "I have seen you before, no? What is your name?"

Rarely did I follow in new encounters but somehow Anna's pale blues held me there. They said it was her place to lead.

"Peter," I replied. "I come here all the time. I live just down the block."

Looking pleased, Anna quickly went on as if there was a clock ticking somewhere, though her manner was calm.

"Ahhh, you live around here," she said. "What is your last name, Peter?"

"Sinovich. What's your name?"

As a couple of gulls settled on the grass near us, sensing that more fruit may appear, Anna actually did a quick toe stand, brought her eyes level to mine, reached out, and pressed her palm to my chest. Literally holding my gaze, she said, "Perfect, how wonderful. My name is Anna Katerina, from the spark of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. You know them?"

Feeling her warm hand and straight on with her gaze, I watched her pupils expand as she dropped her arm and came back to her heels. Certainly taken, I simply stared at her smile. As her head tilted aside the least bit and the gulls began to call, I finally answered.

"I have heard of them."

"How nice," she said

Turning to her groceries, Anna went into one of the bags and came out with a badly bruised apple that had gotten stepped on during the spill. Holding it toward me she said, "Here Peter Sinovich, break this up for the gulls."

"I'll do better than that," I replied. Going into my pocket for a small buck knife, I cubed up the fruit nicely on the park bench.

As more gulls began to swoop and hover Anna giggled with pleasure.

"Oh my, Peter. You are one that is prepared aren't you? Does that come from living alone?"

Starting to feel the excitement of the drift, I took a piece of the apple, answered in the affirmative, and pitched it high. As it reached its zenith a gull dived and snatched it.

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Anna, suddenly a little girl, did a little hop and clapped her hands.

"Good pitch, Peter, that's really humming them," she said, as if she were at a Mariners baseball game. "Is that correct?"

"You got it right, Anna. You do the rest."

Tickled with awe, Anna pitched the rest of the apple pieces to the swooping gulls while I marveled at her grace and fluid movement. It was as close to perfection as I had ever seen.

Our last piece of apple gone, we looked at each other and smiled. After a moment Anna dusted her hands and turned to face me squarely.

"Peter Sinovich, please take that other bag and walk me home. I live in that glass building just across the square. There is an elevator."

Bending down to pick up the sack, I looked up at Anna.

Holding the other sack to her breast, she was watching me like a character study that she would test later. I gathered the sack but continued to look up at her. She quickly looked to the hovering gulls, shivered with a little giggle, and dropped her eyes back to mine. As her cheeks slightly rouged to a small patch of warmth under those cool pools of blue, she smiled and said, "Come Peter, I will give you a tour. I hope you will like it."

I followed.

That best of all seasons in Seattle was spent with Anna: Mariners games at Safeco Field, fast boats to the San Juan Islands and Victoria, Canada, or simple walks along the waterfront. Anna turned the city for me. I cut back on my job and spent much of that time with her up in her apartment that overlooked the bay and the broader Puget Sound. On a clear day the view through the glass walls from her bed held a backdrop of the snow capped Olympics as they stretched up from the edge of the Pacific Ocean. The kitchen was big enough to serve 100 people and Anna took particular pleasure in cooking up her Beef Stroganoff there. Cleaning was no problem. She had both a Russian cook and maid on call but she rarely used them. There was also a quite expansive exercise studio for her Pilates. With her help and instruction I was amazed at what such exercises could do for the body and spirit. And when Anna brought moves of the bedroom to the studio, Nirvana definitely became more than just a name for a band. To say that my horizons grew fit would be an understatement. But as with all else, the glorious Seattle summer had to come to an end.

It was that time in late September when Seattle seemed hung on an edge. Dry and comfortable, no big change as fall fell, but the marine air could again be sensed. All those who were denizens knew that an adieu to the best there was would soon be due.

With the shades fully pulled back and nothing but sky, water and snow capped mountains peaking in, Anna and I lay against the headboard and watched the island ferries come and go. While she finger danced along my inner thigh Anna said in a rather offhanded way, "I'm really going to miss you Peter Sinovich, what will I ever do without you?"

Whenever Anna used both my names I knew something was going on.

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Something that usually would not be subject to my approval.

"What do you mean," I said. "Are you going somewhere?"

"Yes," Anna replied. "I am going to Russia."

My languid repose suddenly a thing of the past, I bolted upright and stared at her.

"Russia! When? For how long?"

Anna lithely hopped from the bed and moved to the glass, her back turned as the sun washed her. Just the thought of such flesh and grace being gone broke my heart. I pushed for an answer.

"Well!?"

Anna turned and faced me, her look one of scrutiny that I had learned to easily recognize. Only this time there was an edge to it that scared me.

"Well, the day after tomorrow," she said. "And for a long time. Maybe forever."

"But why? What about us?" I asked.

Anna waved my questions off for a moment but decided to answer.

"I am Russian, Peter Sinovich. Somewhere in your lineage there is a small part of Russia. Good enough for a while. But you are American. There is no us. There never could be. We had a very good season. Now it is time for me to have a Russian. To be a Russian."

Feeling my first loss like this, I denied what was happening to me.

"You can't be serious. I can't believe this."

"Believe it. You were very good Peter Sinovich. Lucky girls await you, no doubt."

Being crushed didn't feel like I thought it did. It was worse.

"Anna," I said, "I thought that you loved me. Was I a fool?"

Anna seemed to soften a little. That high color came to her cheeks as she replied.

"There are no fools, Peter. Only people who wish to share. I watched you before. I saw that you were good. In the Market, I saw that the women knew. I wanted you too. It was glorious fun. There will be others. They will not waste you. But for us it is over."

Really dumped topsy turvy, I was at a big loss of what to say, what to do. It hurt. Maybe I loved Anna. Tragedy struck so quickly.

"Anna," I said, "how could you?"

Anna hiked her hands to her waist, cocked a hip and said, "Oh come on Peter Sinovich, how could you? You'd do it again if you could. Leave it. I have to make arrangements and will be gone tonight. This place is sold and my shipping people will take it over as soon as I'm gone. Please be gone when I get back. And good luck dear heart. You'll be fine."

While I stared naked from the bed after her, Anna went into her dress-

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ing room. I heard her shower running as I tried to gather my things without winching to inability. A half hour later she appeared dressed to the tens, went to the entry door, and opened it. Looking back and waving with a smile she said, "You were good. Bye Peter Sinovich."

Watching the door close this time, of all the times, try as I might, I could not smile.

My job gone because I did not pay my union dues, I had to let my nice apartment go. Suddenly I was right back to where I had been when I first came to Seattle. Hanging around the waterfront with no money was not the way to go. After the way Anna ditched me I just didn't feel like tickling the skirts that cruised the market area. Besides I was starting to get a little long in the tooth and there were younger men who had taken up the spot that I had vacated when Anna came along. Seattle had been nice but I really owed it nothing. I thought of my Appalachians and the land where I was born.

While working maintenance among the many shipyards to get by and surfing the internet at my boarding house, I discovered a job for a class A rough carpenter. Development construction work near my old haunts in the Appalachian foothills. I applied for it online and my experience in the many construction jobs during the Seattle boom must have gotten me in. They gave me two weeks to get there and said that my tools would be provided. I would be building houses for a big outfit out of the D.C. area. D.C. was beginning to stretch further out toward the beautiful Shenandoah area of Virginia and the rolling humps of the Appalachian region. The site was a stone's throw from Thornton, my last area of work in that region. Olivia began to play on my mind as I prepared to head back to that area. Knowing now how she must have felt when I left, I squirmed a little at the thought of running into her, not to mention the child.

With my last bit of money I flew cross-country to D.C. and caught a Greyhound over the Blue Ridge Mountains to Harrisonburg, Virginia and the Happy Homes personnel office. They provided a small advance and transportation the last 20 miles east to the job site, along with adequate housing.

Riding to the site through a few small towns, including Thornton, I wondered if Olivia and my kid were still around there. It had been more than 6 years, closer to seven, since I had left. The towns were a little bigger, more high neon and fast food places. But the green, clean air, and feeling of security among the walls of high land was still there. While it still hurt some, Seattle was beginning to ebb a bit.

Most of the crew was already there when I arrived, even my assistant, a younger guy named Chuck. He was inexperienced but lived around there and was able to start an apprenticeship under me. I guess all those years of pounding nails for the union in Seattle stood for something after all. Me, a teacher, fancy that. Chuck was a nice guy, eager to help, and good at conversation without being nosy. We got along well which was a relief for me. Women aside, I was still working my way toward some kind of societal norm when it came to relationships. And even my attitudes toward women had shifted. I knew that what you wished for could come true awfully fast. I didn't chase like before. Despite the pain, Anna had

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booted some smarts into my head along those lines. Everyone deserves a fair shake when it comes to their souls.

With the delivery of a new supply of siding board held up, Chuck and I opted for a roofing crew rather than watch the clock. I was a little heavier and figured that roofing would help check it some. Chuck was just a 'whatever' young man who liked my conversation. The day was clear and cool. Chuck was laying the tiles and going on about the schools of the area while I followed and shot. We were well ahead of the projected square feet for the day so the pace was toned to leisurely. Such times on a roof were good places in a beautiful country. I looked around at the lumps of land running to hazy blue and enjoyed the fresh air. The thought that we were knocking it down both in pay and productivity lifted me as I ran out of nails. I reloaded and looked down to the parking area to rest my eyes. My sight has always been far better than normal but at that moment I thought I must be seeing things. There at the edge of the lot stood a young woman holding the hand of a little boy. The woman was Olivia and the boy was plainly mine. Stunned completely, I dropped my gun and looked to Chuck who was staring at me and grinning like a Cheshire.

"Take a break," he said. "I can finish this one. It's almost time to punch out anyway."

But I couldn't move. I just stood there looking at them until the boy waved. That brought me to in a way that I had never experienced. I slowly lifted my hand and watched him smile and jump about. Olivia simply observed the boy, looked back, and shrugged her shoulders. Slowly, I climbed down the ladder and approached them. Thoughts and feelings ran through me in a way that I had no grasp of. Like a ricochet among haphazard steel, they flew around without rhyme or reason. Covering the distance to Olivia and the boy seemed to take the longest time but eventually I got there.

"Hi.," I said, feeling lucky to get it out.

Olivia looked better than ever. She held a certain poise that must have begun maturing after I had left. The confidence in her eyes no longer looked unchallenged but it was obviously stronger. Time and again my eyes came back to the boy as I stood there dumbfounded. It was like looking at myself when I was a kid. Suddenly I went weak in the knees and dropped to my knee pads. I looked at the boy and for the first time knew that I was looking at a miracle.

"Mark," Olivia said, "this is your father. His name is Peter."

Squirring a little bit, Mark looked up at Olivia.

"I already know that Mommy."

Turning back to me, Mark offered his hand and continued, "I'm in first grade and I can do my ABCs."

My eyes flooded and it became difficult to speak but I managed to reply, "That's very good, Mark. Your mommy must be very proud of you."

That was it. I had to rise while I still could. I looked to the sky for help while Olivia simply looked on.

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Finally, beginning to gather myself, I suggested that we have a seat at a nearby picnic table. As we moved in that direction we passed Chuck as he headed toward the clock.

"Don't worry Peter," he said. "I'll punch your ticket. See you tomorrow."

"You bet you will," I replied.

Seated at the picnic table, Olivia and Mark on one side and me on the other, I noticed that Olivia had no ring on her finger but didn't say anything. Mark couldn't sit still so Olivia said that he could go off a ways and play as long as he stayed within sight. For a minute we just looked across the table at one another and listened to Mark sing some cowboy ditty a little ways off. We must have known that the thread of that ditty was ours as well. Finally I found my voice.

"How are you Olivia? You look super."

Taking a deep breath and looking down, Olivia just shook her head and inspected her hands before she replied.

"It's been rough Peter. I went back to school, doubled up on class load, got my degree in elementary education. I teach in Harrisonburg."

Olivia paused to gather her words before continuing.

"I still live in Thornton but spend a lot of time at the family place. I couldn't have made it without them. Mark is like my little brother to them. But we're here and thankful for that. What about you? There's something different about you other than just a few years."

A little relieved to see that Olivia didn't peg me for the ass hole that I had been, I shrugged.

"I've been in Seattle the whole time, did the hustle for a while. Had to grow up some in the end. I'm sorry for the way we ended but I guess that's cold comfort now."

"Some, Peter. But not like you think. You're my boy's father. It's nice to hear....and see that you're not the same. You always could walk the work. Maybe your character has caught up."

"And you were always big hearted, Olivia. Bringing Mark to see me shows a grace that has grown to match your heart. I'm surprised that any partner would allow it."

Smiling ruefully, Olivia said, "There is no partner. There was and you're right, he wouldn't have allowed it. I married another teacher while in school. A real bastard, worse than you could ever be. He really tried to turn the screw on Mark because he wasn't his own. And he would slap me if I even looked at another man. I divorced him three years ago."

"I guess the road has been no expressway for either of us," I said. "Maybe if we took it slow the bumps wouldn't hurt as much. We could just shrug them off. I'd like to see you again sometime. All of us together. Think that is possible."

Searching my eyes for a moment, Olivia shrugged.

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"It's possible. The Big Show is coming to the area this weekend. It's a kind of circus-carnival combined into one. Mark has been going on about it ever since his friends started bragging about how their dads were going to take them."

Olivia paused a moment, searched my eyes again, and went into her shoulder bag. She came out with a card and slid it across the table.

"It's where I live, Olivia Spencer now. The numbers are there. Saturday evening, 6pm. Call if you are going to be late. It'll be a surprise for Mark."

Olivia stood and touched my shoulder as she went by.

"I have to go now," she said.

I watched her walk away, gather Mark, and get in her car. As she drove by to exit the lot I jumped to the top of the table, held the card high, and screamed, "I'll be there."

In the rearview mirror, as she held her hand up, I fancied that I could see her smile.

Along an old airstrip just out of Thornton the night sky was aglow with the lights of the Big Show. Multicolored rocket capsules spun high before they swooped to the earth and shot up again. Riders young and old screamed in merriment as they flashed by just feet from the ground. Bumper car drivers careened around a platform, jolting and spinning one another as flashing lights morphed their faces into surreal expressions. Out near the edge of the strip, facing the highway and next to the huge tent, was the Big Wheel. Waves of colored lights ran from its hub to its rim, collapsed, and ran again.

Olivia, Mark and I opted for the Big Wheel right off. Clamped in, we excitedly spun into the darkness above. From atop each of its circles we could see all the lights of Thornton and the dark Virginia countryside beyond. Laughing and getting to know my boy and his mother as we looked out over the lights into the dark beyond gave me a real special feeling. It was like Thornton was our planet and the Big Show was our moon.

I looked over Mark to Olivia on the other side of the carriage to see if I could guess how she was feeling. She was not tuned to the lights and the beyond. She was watching me. She smiled and looked to our son and his happiness before lifting her eyes back to me.

"This really brings you all the way out, huh?" she said.

I smiled. She was right. And I knew that my heart must have found a home near my sleeve when Mark looked up and spoke.

"Don't cry scaredy cat. This is fun!"

Olivia choked a laugh as I reached over and took her hand.

"I'm not scared, Mark," I said. "Are you scared Olivia?"

Olivia turned serious and her eyes suddenly pooled as well.

"I'm not scared," Olivia replied. "Sometimes it's not good to be scared."

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As the wheel brought us down for the last time, Mark added his hand to ours with a laugh. And like travelers from the beyond, stepping back to home, we went to see the Big Show anew, all us three.