

Wilderness House Literary Review 5/2

Jacob Spears

No Traffic at This Hour

WHILE BRUSHING HIS teeth for bed, Abe Holloway contemplated the stubble of his face as he peered expressionlessly into the bathroom mirror. He had to shave the next day. Abe hated that. Every morning a shave awaited him. And then work. Disbursement and reimbursement... Holloway took care of all the payment processing for the office. He was thinking about it already and he hated that even more. Then a thought occurred to Abe. He smiled at himself for this one. He lathered up and shaved. This was a great idea. He'd be ripe for work the next day.

Carla was already in bed with the lights off; one of the late night talk show hosts was doing his monologue on the television. Abe slipped into the full-sized bed and gave his wife a kiss.

"Oh... so soft." She rubbed the palm of her hand on Abe's smooth cheek. "Did you just shave?" she asked. Carla was smiling, still feeling Abe's skin.

"I did."

"But... won't you have to shave again tomorrow?"

"No. This'll last though the day." Abe felt particularly proud of himself. Carla's question concerned him, but telling her that a shave at night would last though the workday gave him confidence.

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Abe never felt better. When he woke up in the mornings after his nightly shave he felt like he was already ready for work. He just had to get up and go. Well, now that he was taking his showers at night, usually after he had dinner with Carla. That way, getting up and going to work felt like a cinch. He thought how much easier work was getting as he brushed his teeth. He could really get everything done faster. He was even enjoying work more, though he wouldn't admit it. Getting ready for work really is the worst part of the whole deal, Abe thought.

After he rinsed off his face from shaving Abe went back downstairs into the kitchen. The next thing wasn't so much of an idea, but an instinct. Abe turned on the switch for the kitchen light and threw the used filter into the trash. He put in a fresh, white one and scooped in the coffee he'd usually make for tomorrow morning. It wasn't until after he added the water and pressed on, when the noise started to kick in, that Abe realized he just had another breakthrough — what a swell idea. Abe whistled a cacophony of notes and started digging around the top shelf of the cabinet with the cups and mugs. He felt around in the back and pulled out a thermos that somebody — was it his wife or an aunt? — had gotten him as a Christmas present a few years ago. He'd never used it. After the coffee finished, he filled his thermos.

"Office secret Santa," Abe said aloud. He set the thermos on the counter — *would it still be warm in the morning?* — and went to bed. Carla had the TV off, but she was still awake.

"Did you just make coffee?"

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"Yes I did." Abe sung.

"... it smells so good. It just makes me want to get up."

"Don't worry about it." Abe was in his boxers. He slipped into bed with his wife.

"Did you just have a cup of coffee?" Carla leaned up on her elbow and tried to look at Abe better. "Right before you go to bed?"

"I didn't have any now." Abe kissed her on the forehead. "It's for tomorrow. So I don't have to get up and make it first thing."

Of course, Carla asked if it would get cold. Abe told her not to worry about it and about the thermos. He kissed her again and they went to bed.

The coffee was still warm when Abe came downstairs. Not hot, but it suited Abe just fine.

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He stuck his nose in the fridge. He wasn't hungry, but he was waiting for the coffee to brew again. He wanted to see if maybe he could fix his breakfast for the next day. That way he could get up and just be ready for work the next morning lickety-split. Abe thought about it this time. Or the ideas came over him. Abe had become a toast or bagel kind-of-guy since the kids went off to school. Sometimes Carla would be up by then and she'd fry him an egg or he'd do it himself if he really wanted one. And a glass of juice, too. He liked orange juice to start off the day. It was usually the only fruit he got and Carla always nagged him for that. The glass of juice he could do. He took a glass from the drying rack by the sink and poured his juice and set it on a shelf in the fridge. That way he wouldn't even have to pour it the next day. But he couldn't make the toast or an egg, none of that would last. The coffee maker was bubbling, finishing brewing and Abe was stumped. He poured his coffee into the thermos and leaned against the counter.

What was that thing that Carla always praised? She always made the roasts in it. The crock pot. He dug it out of one of the cabinets under the countertop. That was the sort of magic he was looking for.

He set the thing on the counter and gave it a good looking over. After he plugged it into the wall he set the control to warm. Until that moment Abe was very determined, but irresolute. Then he found exactly the idea he was looking for. Behind the cereal stood a forgotten cylindrical container of Quaker oats. He'd never been an oatmeal man in his life.

He looked at the man on the cylinder (who Abe forgot from grade school was William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania) and then read the directions on the other side. He poured in the oats, added the water and some milk and looked down into the crock pot. Abe realized why he was never an oatmeal man; he probably hadn't eaten it since he was a kid and that was because he didn't like it. Abe frowned but the resolution never left his face. It was just bland, that's all. He added some sugar and he got inventive. He cut an apple from the counter into a couple of chunks and tossed them in. He even found where Carla put the cinnamon and sprinkled some on top.

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Abe licked his finger walking up the steps. It wouldn't taste so bad, he told himself. And besides that wasn't the point: Abe was becoming a new man. The shave, the coffee and now the breakfast. He'd be ready work. Carla was asleep when he squirmed into bed. The anticipation didn't get to Abe. He slept well and the oatmeal wasn't even that bad the next day. In fact, Abe kind of liked it.

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Abe turned fifty-one sometime in the middle of this without much regard. I mean sometime between becoming an oatmeal man and before everything else. Carla had a cake for him, but everything seemed pretty small compared the blow-out, as Abe called it, Carla threw for him last year. But without the cake, Abe might not have noticed. And the calls from the Tom and Lacy. They were nice, but Tom called so late. He said he had a night class and as he started to talk about how his classes were going and how he was thinking of studying abroad next semester Abe's attention waned and he started to think about getting the oatmeal going. He could've switched to the cordless phone, but he told his son that it was getting late.

"C'mon, old man," Tom said. "You can't be getting to bed already? It just barely got dark here."

"There's an hour difference—anyway, I mean, it doesn't make a difference," Abe felt uneasy. "It's not that... work's been a little tough on me lately and I need to get an early start tomorrow," Abe sighed.

"Sorry, how come you didn't mention it?"

"It's nothing to worry about. I just need some rest is all."

Abe was relieved to say goodbye and hang up the phone. He knew he lied. Work was fine. He knew just wanted to start making his oatmeal for tomorrow. Abe preferred to make it fresh every night and after a couple nights of shaving and then making breakfast he switched the order around so the shave would last longer.

He'd been at it for almost two weeks now and he'd never felt better. He was refreshed in the mornings, ready for whatever work was needed at the office. He wondered why he lied: if he was so proud why didn't he tell Tom his new accomplishment? Abe mulled over it while he made his oatmeal. There was something about it that bothered him. But as the coffee brewed he thought less about the lie. Tom probably didn't even care that he got off the phone so quick. After all it was his birthday.

"That's right," Abe said aloud while he shaved. "You're fifty-one."

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"You're work here hasn't gone unnoticed, Holloway; we want you to know that."

"Thank you." Abe still became soft-spoken and uncertain like the rest of us when talking to the boss. Al Bowman in this case, the general manager of accounting for the company.

"We need people like you. Not too many though. Damnit, if they were all like you I wouldn't need to be here." Bowman laughed. Abe still moved

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about in his chair a bit uneasy.

It was a promotion. "There is a supervisor spot opening up and we all think you're the right man for the job. How's a manager position sound?"

Abe didn't understand. He made a movement, as if he didn't know whether to get up or stay in his chair.

"Relax, Holloway" Bowman brushed the air in front of Abe with his hand. "You're not getting my job. No; they need someone over in receiving. Up top they've been saying for months things needed to be taken care of over there. Only thing is no one wanted to do it. Oh it's work all right, more responsibility, but it's a better job—more respectable for a man like you."

That was that. Abe had his own office (no more cubicle) by the end of the week.

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The coffee was in the thermos and the crock pot was heating the oatmeal. It was late and Abe still needed a shave. He peeked into the bedroom and Carla was already asleep. At least, she didn't answer when Abe called out in a loud whisper. He considered putting off the shave 'til tomorrow. But no, it was best to keep up the habit. After all, it got him this new job. His staff even liked him as a boss and everyone up top was real pleased with him. Better get the shave Abe figured. In the darkness, Abe sat down on the edge of the bed and scratched his bristley face with his palms.

He pulled out the flashlight under the bed he kept for emergencies and started going through his closet. Abe would set everything out for tomorrow. He picked out the tie, found a clean shirt and some slacks. Abe realized that before he went to bed every night he was already doing this in his head: picking out what to wear for the next day. Making sure he had a tie to match his shirt and the right color socks were clean.

But why wait until morning to pull everything out and put it on?

That was the question that went through Abe's head as he found himself compelled to set everything out on the chair for the next day. It gave him energy; he didn't feel so burned out anymore.

When Abe looked in the mirror the next day he even thought he looked better. More put-together were the exact words he thought. Carla thought so to and she told him he looked handsome on his way out the door to work. Something she hadn't said in a long time to Abe.

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That night Carla stayed up, waiting for Abe to come to bed. He was in a particularly good mood when he came home and they had a nice dinner together. A little later Abe went to take his shower and Carla thought of how nice it would be to make love to him like they used to, changing positions, moving from the bed to the floor, standing up and finishing bent over the bed. It made her blush. In truth, she thought Abe might lack the energy to do anything like that anymore. It'd been mostly missionary as far as she could remember since the kids. But during the day her mind

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returned to how he seemed this morning... handsome, energetic and she realized the word was sexy.

Abe was still feeling energetic as he came upstairs to shave and head to bed. He didn't notice Carla waiting for him in the darkness. (She wanted to surprise him.) He pulled out his flashlight and started to pick out his clothes from the closet. Abe found everything he needed for the next day and threw his belt onto the chair as well. Carla was squirming in anticipation. She wondered what he was doing snooping around with his flashlight. But she was going to wait until after the shave, when his face was nice and soft.

Abe came back in and started to undress. He still hadn't noticed Carla, who sat up in bed with her eyes open. She wanted to call out to him. But she held back. She watched him eagerly as he undressed. Then Abe went for the clothes on the chair. Put on the socks, a new undershirt and out of one pair of boxer and into another. Abe put on his slacks and his shirt. He buttoned it up and got into bed with Carla.

"Abe, what are you doing?" Carla started out talking sweetly to him.

"Carla? You're up—sorry I didn't mean to wake you. Was it the flashlight?"

"Abe what are you doing with... *clothes on*?"

"Just a little extra step I'm taking." Abe thought about this. His reply came out with an air of uncertainty he felt. But he needed to stand by this. Everything else had gotten him so far there was no going back now.

"Well, it doesn't matter." Carla snuggled up next him and started kissing around his lips.

Abe gave into her, but it soon became obvious that he was reluctant to take off any of his clothes.

"If were going to make, Abe, you're going to have to—just take off these clothes already. I don't even know what you're doing anymore."

"Carla, I can't take these clothes off now. I'm ready for work tomorrow."

Carla told Abe she didn't understand what this meant. It was all starting to seem a little bit silly to her. I'm mean the coffee and the oatmeal was one thing. But here she was, offering herself to him was the way she thought of it, and he was thinking about work the next day. The nerve. Needless to say, she rolled over. Abe shrugged it off, because he knew that everything else had gotten him this far. To turn back now would be a mistake.

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Throughout work Abe checked himself to make sure he didn't look too wrinkly. He thought everything still looked good. There were a few light ones here and there, but nothing that made it seem like Abe wasn't ready for work.

Carla didn't wait up for Abe that night. But when he slid into bed with his belt, tie and shoes on it was too much for her.

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"Take your damn shoes off Abe!" She screamed which meant Abe probably kicked her a little bit with his loafers. Abe didn't budge. "Abe!"

"No."

So Abe went to the couch. He didn't really seem to care. But the couch didn't suit him. He got up and looked at his oatmeal. It was late. Or to Abe it seemed early. Might as well eat now he figured. He scarfed it down and then sat on the couch. Abe felt excited. He wasn't sure why yet. He knew there was an idea coming, but he wasn't sure what it was. He sat there thinking it over and it came to him: he grabbed his thermos and made for the car. It wasn't the most comfortable sleeping spot, but if he pushed the steering wheel all the way up and the seat all the way back he could get himself into a position to sleep. And sleep he did, knowing that tomorrow he'd be ready for work. Put the keys in the ignition and be right on his way.

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And so that's how it went. Carla would still eat dinner with him for some unknown reason. Then Abe would start to get around to doing everything he had to do so he could be ready for work the next day. He even started kissing Carla good night after she got in bed and then making his way for the car in a fresh shirt and a different tie.

One morning before putting the car in drive Abe went back inside to grab the crock pot, and the oatmeal. He'd make it at work. It would be there for him in the morning. A little after five, Abe put everything together right on top of his desk, set it to low and then went home. As he shaved that night and then prepared to change into his clothes for the next day, Abe got to thinking about his oatmeal at the office. Suddenly, it just made sense that he should be at the office. And the idea came through with such clarity. Everything just hit him like a revelation. Abe put his clothes all on one hanger, threw his razor and shaving cream into a mess case, grabbed his deodorant, took the thermos with him and made for the car. He already had a pillow and some blankets in the back seat. He drove off to the office and took everything in with him. Then he made a little place to sleep for himself behind the desk. He'd pack it all up in the closet the next morning, eat his oatmeal, put on the shirt and tie and be ready for work.

Abe came home that day. Had dinner with Carla. Told her how well everything was going at the office. He even thought they were talking about another promotion and a raise was certain, one way or the other. Then he packed up some more things, a new outfit for tomorrow and drove off to the office. Started the oatmeal. He could've shaved in the morning, but Abe figured he should still shave at night since that's where all these epiphanies spawned from. He made his way to the employee bathroom and gave himself a good, clean shave. He used the coffee maker in the break room and filled up his thermos. He got his pillow and everything out of the closet and set up his bed. It was still early. Maybe he could get some work done before work tomorrow. That way he'd be ready.

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