

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Richard Peabody

Peppermint Schnapps

Winter sucks. Almost lunchtime and nobody absolutely nobody has been in to talk with Brent about any of the sleek new Mercedes M-class SUVs baking in the soap-streaked showroom window sunshine of a January day. No way can he accept this as he glares in Gabriel's direction. That tight-ass low class anti-freeze sucking Eurotrash excuse for a human is chatting up one of the best looking absolutely divine black women Brent has ever seen off-screen. Fuck me, he thinks. Why today of all days?

At breakfast, his Maria Conchita Alonso wannabe Puerto Rican wife read him the riot act about their sex life. Brent feels like shit. He's smoking too much again (he can't resist those Montecristo No.2 Hubanos), his dot.com stocks are tanking, he's having trouble making payments on his condo, and he's gotta gotta gotta make a sale today. Old man Focke Wulf and Messerschmitt, the Nazi CEOs of EuroTrash Motors called him on the carpet last week. Shit. Fuck. Piss.

When Gabriel opens the door for the woman (Who does she look like? Vanessa Williams? No, younger, darker.) Brent is beside himself. Gabriel's last minute wink kills something deep inside him and covers it with dirt. He's boiling in his own juices and so pissed he doesn't even notice another customer walk in the opposite side of the showroom and up to his desk.

"You working?"

Brent, distracted, turns to the metallic-sounding voice. Looks like an ex-cop. That tell-tale barrelhouse chest. Only cops have that. Denim jacket. Blue jeans. Blue eyes. Converse shoes. Small black gym bag.

"Yes, sir. Put you in a coupe today?"

"Doubtful. Very doubtful. But talk to me about this SUV. Mercedes has an SUV? Why?"

Brent knows this guy isn't going to spring for the price tag. He kind of pops the replay button on his mental tape machine and runs down the features on the ML320. He could do this in his sleep. Fuel injection, 215 horses or you can move up to 268 with the ML430 and opt for the Sports Package, the Bose speakers, and 3rd Row seats, or move up again to 342 horses with the ML55 and all of the amenities. The guy does the predictable schtick, kicks the tires, slams the doors, the whole bit. Why do I get these retired guys when Gabriel Angel Face Salesman of the Month gets the babes? Brent catches a glint of a reflection in the windshield. Of course if any more of my hair goes down the drain it'll be time for Rogaine. (Who does she look like? Tyra Banks? Right age but wrong eyes, smaller tits.)

"Mind taking a spin in one of these?"

Oh shit, the rube wants to go for a ride. "Sure, why not." I've got nothing better to do Brent thinks than sit here and work on an ulcer, and so he gets the keys to the road machine in the lot off a ring by his desk, swoops his black leather duster off the back of his chair (his Matrix-look) and away they go.

Thirty minutes later Brent finds himself halfway to Leesburg on some

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side road in the middle of nowhere. He looks out at the bare trees, snow on the ground. I fucking hate winter, he thinks, and pushes his Ray-Bans up his nose.

"Do you scuba?"

Brent lurches back. "What?" He'd given up on his sales spiel after Tyson's Corner. It's been quiet for a while now.

"Ever go Scuba diving?"

"No."

"Young man like you should take it up."

"Why's that?"

"You get to travel some amazing places, see incredible things."

"I'll think about it." Amazing, incredible. Maybe it is genuinely possible, Brent thinks, to be bored to death.

"You remind me of some of the guys I knew in the islands who scubed during the day and would hang out at this bar and fish all day. Nothing else to do really. They'd tie chunks of meat to steel line. The shark would take the hook and swim away as fast as it could until it hit the end of the line. Full stop. Then they'd just reel the shark in."

"I remind you of them?"

"Yeah, they'd just sit there all day and drink in the hot sun and fish for sharks."

Just what I need. Time to wrap this up. "So..." and Brent draws a blank. What was this guy's name? Had they even talked names? "I'm sorry I'm kind of having a brain dead day. What was your name again?"

"Smitty."

Figures. "So, Smitty, what do you think of this baby? Can you see yourself hitting the links in one of these? Maybe driving up to Vermont for some fine powder?"

"Out of my price range."

No shit Sherlock. Brent eyes his Rolex. "Well, got to get back to the showroom soon or I'll miss lunch."

"Wouldn't want that. I just wanted to try one out. It's a swell drive."

Swell. Brent has never had such a swell time.

"Hey I gotta take a leak, any objection to my pulling over there in the trees."

"Sure, whatever."

While the guy crunches snow into the woods, Brent contemplates leaving him. Sighs

-- it would never wash. Focke Wulf would start World War III and fire him the minute he heard about it. Messerschmitt would have him publicly flogged. Brent thinks of his wife. She was almost as hot as that

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black woman when they first met. Nah. He's lying. She was never that hot. (Who does she look like? Naomi Campbell? Right shade, but younger with larger tits.) The wife had been hammering him all morning about having a kid. A kid? She was crazy. The last thing he needed to worry about was having a kid right now. And then he gets an idea. A doozy. Why not a puppy? That's kind of like a kid, right? Hell, yeah. He'll go home at lunchtime and surprise her with a little winter afternoon delight. Stop at the pound on the way and pick out one of those floppy eared mutts, the kind no woman can resist. That might be just what she needs. Might buy him some breathing room.

Smitty is standing by the passenger door so Brent rolls down the window. Now what? He has a flask in his gloved hand.

"Care for some Peppermint schnapps?"

Peppermint schnapps. That brings back some memories. College days. The frat parties. Damn.

"Why not?" Brent says.

Smitty passes him the flask. Expensive. Classy. The guy's got more taste than he thought. Gotta get a flask like this. And Brent takes a hit. Then a longer one. He is pleased the old man let him drink first. He doesn't like sharing spit with strangers.

"Thanks. That 's a blast from the past."

"Really?"

"College stuff."

"Coeds?"

Coeds? How old is this guy? "Them too." And he thought of Kim. How he'd never ever met anyone else with such perfect breasts. Not real ones anyway. He seemed to be daydreaming.

"Took me a while to track you down but I've always been a patient man."

"What's that?" Brent must be hearing things.

"You've never amounted to much Mr. Sullivan have you? And you always lived off one woman or another so your name was never listed in the phone book."

Mr. Sullivan? Brent tries to itch above his eye but his hands are heavy and he's moving slow, slower than slow. What's the old guy talking about?

"But these days with Yahoo People Finder you can find anybody and with your fancy new job, hell you're legit. You even have a wife. Though she is screwing that French guy you work with."

What the fuck? Gabriel? She's fucking Gabriel! Brent tries to speak "How the --" but his lips are sluggish and rubbery. Almost feels like his mouth has been sewn shut. He can't move. He really can't move and Brent panics.

"Oh you can't talk. Amazing stuff, Puffer fish venom. Works fast. You'll be pretty much paralyzed for about 20 minutes and this shouldn't

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take that long." Smitty reaches into the black gym bag at his feet and pulls out some rubber tubing. He bends down to the exhaust pipe and fiddles and then brings it around to the back window and pokes the tubing through.

"I knew you must have given her some sort of Mickey Finn cuz I never could believe she'd sleep with a guy like you."

Her? What is he talking about?

"Have you ever seen what someone looks like after they've been dead for 12 hours? The face is swollen. The skin so blue. So cold. Like packed snow."

Brent tries to get his tongue to move, tries to focus on the man.

"No, I don't suppose you have. It's kind of ironic, isn't it? Your one chance to see that, and you won't be able to."

Brent's body shifts a little and he slumps over against the window. He can no longer make eye contact. But the man's words keep coming.

"A couple of your frat brothers told me how you guys did it. Met them for a drink in Brooklyn. Once a Phi Delt always a Phi Delt right?" He holds the flask up again. "Peppermint Schnapps. Mixed into the hot chocolate after skiing. Absolutely brilliant, Mr. Sullivan. Brilliant." And Smitty tipped an imaginary hat. "I'd figured you for grain alcohol."

Peppermint Schnapps. Brent should have guessed. He was just a little out of it. There was still time. He'd give Smitty the SUV. Let him take it. Leave me by the side of the road. He'd say he was jacked and then he'd get even with Gabriel. He'd fix that lowlife Eurotrash motherfucker.

Smitty duct taped the glass opening around the tubing and rear window. "A pity to be wasting this stuff on you," he said, and then poured some of the Schnapps on Brent's thinning hair. Next, he threw the flask into the front seat. "Your fingerprints are on the flask of course." While Brent watched, he couldn't even turn his head to follow, Smitty slid behind the wheel leaving the door open and cranked the motor before pressing a button closing all the windows.

"You're having a bad day Brent old buddy. A pisser of a bad day. Gabriel's got your wife, your stocks are in the toilet, you're losing your condo, trouble on the job, and there was just no easy way out."

Smitty steps down and stands there for a second, his calm blue eyes screwing up tighter and tighter. "My daughter, Kimberly, she dropped out of Freshman year, came home pregnant, and though my wife and I would have done anything to help her, she couldn't face all the pressure. Couldn't decide whether to have the baby or get an abortion. So she offed herself. Pills. All your fault buddy boy."

Kim? Pregnant? Kimberly had gotten pregnant? A baby. His baby? What? Brent tried to motion his head to the keys, tried to tell the man he was sorry. He was crying. God she'd been a virgin. She'd been so afraid. He tried to imagine her eyes, the same blue eyes. Of course. Of course.

"Almost forgot." The man reached in a jacket pocket and pulled out a folded envelope. He propped it on the dash. "Your suicide note. Typed."

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No No No. This isn't happening. This isn't happening. Not today. Not now. Brent was coughing or imagined he was. He couldn't tell any more.

Kim's father reached to close the door and hesitated. "I'm only sorry my wife couldn't be here. She passed five years ago now. Losing Kim broke her heart."

Brent struggled to make eye contact, to plead with the man's baby blues again.

"Lights out, Brent. Sweet Dreams."

Brent watched Kim's father push a button and the automatic door locks slid down

into their channels with one simultaneous sharp click, and then the door closed tight, and he faded into the brown and white winter landscape.