

Wilderness House Literary Review 8/1

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The Way Home

Henry ambled up and down the aisles searching for paper towels. It was the last item on his shopping list he hadn't crossed off. They were used like dish towels, but weren't made of cloth. They resembled toilet paper, but were on longer rolls. He passed a stock clerk, but refused to ask where the paper towels were located, never mind what they actually were. He could do this on his own. Eventually, he reached the paper goods section and recognized them, but only because he could read their names: Bounty, Brawny. He plucked a roll off the shelf, studied it, and placed it in his basket.

While standing in the check-out line, Henry realized he didn't have enough cash to pay for his groceries. He could feel his armpits getting damp. The woman in front of him finished her transaction and wheeled her cart and her toddler away.

"Will that be credit or debit?" the cashier inquired, eyeing the card in Henry's hand.

Henry hesitated and finally answered, "Debit." He slid his card through the swiper.

"Please enter your PIN," the woman requested, smiling.

"My PIN," Henry repeated, then stared blankly at the number pad. A PIN was a password. It was the password he entered into the machine when he needed money. It had four digits. What were they?

Henry felt his forehead moisten as he concentrated. Four digits. What were they? He noticed the young couple behind him rolling their eyes, tapping their feet, crossing their arms, sighing. He had been married once, too.

Less than a year ago, Georgia left him to join God in Heaven. Henry and Georgia used to do the shopping together, strolling side-by-side as he pushed the cart and she pulled what they needed from the shelves. She always used a list; that way, she said, she wouldn't forget anything they came to buy. The funny thing was, sometimes she forgot to write something down on her list. They were married 50 years.

His finger trembling, Henry pushed the numbers that corresponded to their anniversary: 0-6-1-5. June 15. June 15, 1961. "Working..." scrolled across the card swiper's screen. The dampness from Henry's armpits seeped through his shirt now. Moments later, the register drawer dinged open.

"Here are some coupons for you! Have a nice day!" the cashier chirped as she handed him a receipt as long as his arm.

Henry walked through the sliding glass doors and onto the sidewalk. It was a fine summer day: in the 70s and no humidity. People in shorts and sandals bustled along, shopping and dining. On days like these, he and Georgia spent Sunday mornings at an outdoor café in their neighborhood, eating pastries, reading the paper. He worked on the crossword while she read the books section, he remembered. What he couldn't remember at the moment, however, was the way home.