

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/3

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A Warehouse of Wisdom

"THIS IS THE DAYROOM. You'll bring them here during the day,...gets them out of their bed so we can clean the rooms. You'll start with two. After a week, you'll get two more, maybe others. Depends on how many other interns signed up this term."

"CODE BLUE – 212. CODE BLUE – 212."

Karen, the portly activities director, trundled off quickly without a word, apparently going to 212, wherever that was. Scott looked around the large room. There was a TV on the wall in one corner, with a collection of stackable plastic chairs scattered in front, and several people mindlessly watching a daytime soap opera with no sound. One woman sat in a wheelchair in the middle of the room, staring off towards a blank wall. She looked to be in a long sleeveless white nightgown, grayed and tattered as her unkempt hair, the garment oversized with wrinkles much like the mottled sagging skin of her bare arms. A flash of movement caught Scott's eyes, and he turned towards the window that looked out on a patio. There stood a man waving his hands alternately in front of his face, like he was swatting at flies making a grunting noise with each swat. He wore a stained sleeveless T-shirt, soiled boxer shorts and fuzzy slippers. Then, another old man shambled slowly into the room, leaning onto an aluminum walker with two wheels in front and two tennis balls on the back legs. As the man shuffled towards the TV, his left hand trembling causing a shaky gait. Scott saw that the old man was covered only by a hospital gown, open in the back exposing his buttocks. Scott looked around the room, noticing that all of them, a dozen or so seniors- all old men and women- looked sickly, uncared for, and dressed only in sleepwear or underwear.

"What do I do? This isn't what I expected." Scott's own voice surprised him as the words conveying his concerns came out loud from his mouth. He felt a sense of despair and hopelessness at the enormity of what he observed in these few moments. In his mind, he flashed back to a memory of a boy reading *The Cat in the Hat* with his grandma sitting in the rocker as he perched alongside in the window alcove warmed by the sun as they took turns reading childhood classics. This is what he had pictured when the counselor had said the job was a companion for seniors at a senior center. But this was nothing like that all. The words came out again, "What do I do?"

"That's what you're here for." Karen had stepped up behind Scott, seemingly reading his thoughts. "As a college volunteer intern, you are their companion, you help them get cleaned up and dressed; change their diaper like your mother did for you when you were a helpless child. It goes full cycle; it's life. Talk with them, read to them, play cards. That's the companion's job."

"Oh..."



Later that day, Scott was introduced to Agatha. "Have fun with ornery Agatha," the orderly had said when they passed at the doorway to Ag-

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atha's room. Agatha was in her 80s, overweight, and always angry. "Make yourself useful. Get me some cookies and Mountain Dew," Agatha had growled after their introduction. Scott's attempt to please Agatha failed when the food service worker checked her chart and told Scott that the requested items were not authorized for this patient who had diabetes. Scott's return to Agatha's room with juice and crackers was met with a diatribe of curse words reminding Scott of a truck stop restroom on last year's family vacation trip. The next day, Scott brought a newspaper to read to Agatha. She told him to get her glasses from the bedside drawer. There, he discovered two Olympic medals, one gold and one silver. With eyes tearing, Agatha recalled the 1984 Winter Olympic Games at Sarajevo, where her son had medaled in the downhill skiing events. Somewhat sheepishly, Scott had disclosed that his one and only skiing experience consisted of a weekend with cousins in Wisconsin, where he had never progressed past snow-plowing on the bunny hill. Agatha had Scott dig through a bedside drawer until he found a picture of a slender young woman with long blond hair and a big smile wearing a white snow suit with USA emblazoned across the front standing with skis and poles on a snowy slope. "That's me," she had said. Then she had opened up, describing her skiing accomplishments as a member of the US women's ski team in the in 1952 Winter Olympics in Oslo, Norway.

Then more bits and pieces came out, in a flood of emotions. Three years after her son had medaled in '84, her son and husband had died in an avalanche during a family ski trip to Austria. Devastated by the loss of her son and husband, Agatha hadn't been the same since, leading to deterioration of her health and mindset. The excitement of the Olympic experience, all of those good memories had been buried deep, pushed down as Agatha had become consumed with the emptiness and loss of spouse and son. By the end of this first week, however, Scott's interest and enthusiasm for learning about the Olympic experience had pulled Agatha from the depths of despair for the first time in years.

It was the start of his second week as a companion at the Valley View Care Center. Today Scott looked forward to meeting his next charge; gone was the feeling of dread, of being overwhelmed in this place where people like his grandmother were sent to be warehoused, out of the way of hectic lives of sons and daughters who were busy with their careers and families and soccer or little league or band practice. Who had time to care for doddering ill or retired parents when you are in a race to keep up with the Joneses? That first day, Scott had felt the loneliness of the old people who had been set on the shelf, out of the way, with no care or gratitude for the efforts and contributions they had made on behalf of family members over the years. But, in meeting Agatha, and hearing her story and learning of her contributions to the lives of others, made Scott realize that each of these old people, had touched others, helped others, raised responsible sons and daughters, and made their contribution to the lives of those around them. Today, Scott would meet Johnny.

I fell into a burning ring of fire,... The song playing on a bedside table radio sounded familiar to Scott, but he couldn't place it because he preferred the Hip Hop sounds he listened to on his I-Pod.

"This is Johnny. You'll be splitting your time between Johnny and

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Agatha this week," said Karen. The man had thinning grey hair; his thick chest and muscular arms coated with a light grey fuzz suggested that he had worked with his hands doing hard physical labor much of his life. On the man's right bicep Scott saw a tattoo in the shape of an Eagle on top of the world pierced by an anchor, a symbol he associated with the military. The man's left arm and shoulder bore a scar of burnt skin. Like the others Scott recalled seeing in the day room, Johnny wore a sleeveless T-shirt and multi-colored boxer shorts, each faded and bearing stains, the apparent dress code for the residents of Valley View. Johnny appeared to be sleeping and did not acknowledge the two visitors now in his room.

Suddenly, there was a crash in the hallway, with several of the metal plate covers, plates and silverware clanging noisily to the floor.

"Incoming!" Johnny rolled away from the noise and pulled a pillow over his head. He rocked back and forth, holding the pillow tightly over his head, legs twitching.

"Shame on you! Clean that up." It was a woman's brusque sounding voice in the hallway. A man had answered, "Yes 'm. Yes 'm." A nurse came into the room, and calmly touched Johnny's arm as it squeezed the pillow about his head while his body continued to rock and twitch. "Johnny, Johnny, It's ok, just some falling plates and silverware. It's ok." She turned her attention to Scott and whispered, "He was a Marine in Khe Sanh in sixty eight. P-T-S-D, worsening now, that's why he's here."

After a bit, the man relaxed and gave Scott a curt nod when Karen introduced them. Scott tried to make small talk, but his questions were met with a shake of the head or an angry grunt in reply, leaving Scott fearful of provoking the man once again to a fit or to anger. Suppressing with all his might the urge to run from the room, Scott just sat on the arm of the bedside chair and followed Johnny's gaze out the window at the parking lot. They sat silently for some fifteen or twenty minutes, with Scott occasionally peeking at Johnny from the corner of his eye. In the silence, the radio dominated; there were songs about lost love, divorce, pick up trucks, and rodeo. Then the deep throated singer was heard again, this time singing a song about "*I've been everywhere,...*" and a list cities and towns all across the country. Johnny's finger tapped the side rail of the bed keeping the beat of the music.

"That's me, ya know. Was a truck driver forty three years, O-T-R. Jest like ole Johnny Cash, I been everywhere."

"Really? Everywhere?"

"Yep, the Chicago stockyards, old Route 66, Vegas, Pacific coast highway, over the Golden Gate, through the Rockies and Sierras, crossed the Mississippi so many times I can't count, New York for the tall ships in seventy six, and Lauderdale when the kids were down there for spring break,... heh, heh,...good times."

Scott thought of some the family vacations, that trip through the mountains to Disney World, and that long boring trip to Mount Rushmore. Oh, how he hated those long boring car rides. But he could see the excitement in Johnny's eyes as the old man began talking about his truck driving days. Scott found an old highway travel atlas in the garage at home and

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brought it the next day. Funny thing was, Johnny didn't need to look at the maps in that old atlas, he had all those cities and highways memorized in his head. He just came to life, talking about the places he'd been.



Scott had met several other interns, all students from the local community college. In particular, he enjoyed the company of Kara, whose interest was in psychology. Sometimes, when their internship schedules matched, they would take lunch together or sometimes meet up in the dayroom with their senior resident companions for a game of cards or maybe chess. During the dayroom meetings, each intern had introduced to the other their respective companions, the seniors, of course already were acquainted. Kara introduced Scott to James, a retired judge who was now experiencing the memory loss issues associated with the onset of Alzheimer's. The judge's memory came and went, with good days and bad days. James' two grown children had families of their own and lived in other areas of the country. One of the few residents to dress up every day, James was referred to as "the Judge." James' thick head of white hair and polished manners made him popular with the ladies, staff and residents alike. During her short time as an intern, Kara had observed that the progression of his disease lead to more frequent memory incidents and had tarnished his heretofore polished image. The nurse had told Kara that, because he was in denial about his disease, James refused to take his medications, causing more frequent memory incidents. Others could see it, but James, he would smile as he made a joke or offered some high sounding well articulated justification, but the mask of memory loss is hard to cover over with jokes and excuses.

Kara's other charge insisted on being referred to as Doctor Custis. In her eighties, customarily wearing only a flimsy cotton nightdress, Caroline Custis presented to newcomers a somewhat frightening appearance, with her thinning languid shoulder-length silver hair and age spotted skin clinging loosely to her bones giving the woman an emaciated Halloween skeletal look. When she spoke, Doctor Custis' deep gravelly throat projected sounds reminiscent of a talking zombie in cheesy black and white horror film. Her weathered, wrinkled face with stained teeth and yellowed fingers completed the zombie image. For these reasons, fearful new interns, Kara included, shied away from this resident. Encouraged – pushed really- by activities director Karen, Kara soon learned that Doctor Custis was not some sort of Frankenstein monster, but instead a former college professor of English with a PhD, and author, which explained why her room was full of books. Likewise, Dr. Custis was full of stories about living and love and life, even though she had never broken her cigarette smoking habit and it was common knowledge that she would sneak out to the patio for a smoke every day. "Don't ever start," she advised Kara between coughing spasms, "these things will kill ya."



"Where's Kara? She's late. You're gonna have to cover for her if she's absent!" Karen's question was curt, accusatory, as if Scott was somehow accountable for Kara's absence this Monday morning.

"Uhm,...I think she said she was visiting friends over the weekend."

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About thirty minutes later, Scott felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket. He looked around, and then quickly ducked into a janitor's broom closet. Scott looked at the bluish glow of the phone in the darkened closet, feeling a chill and goose-bumps on his skin as he read the following message: *Scott- Stuck in Canada. Lost ID, PPT. HELP.* Scott closed his eyes in disbelief, surrounded by darkness. He opened his eyes and winced at the sharpness of the cell phone light. The frightening message remained.

Mindless, in a daze of uncertainty, Scott walked slowly towards Johnny's room. They were going to the day room for a game of cards. As they walked up to the table, Johnny placed the deck of cards down, and turned to Scott. "Sonny, ya look like ya lost yer last friend. I seen that face on the boys at Khe Sanh."

Scott's eyes moistened. A tear rolled down his cheek, he sniffled, swallowed, and gritted his teeth, fighting the release of a cry. He held up the cell phone showing the text message from Kara. Johnny squinted to read the small print on the tiny screen, mumbling as he read, "...lost ID,... what's PPT? Passport? That little friend of yours? Kara? Goll dang!"

Johnny looked around the room. He waved his hand and signaled to two others in the room. "Judge! Aggie! Come here!" As the others shuffled in their direction, Johnny asked Scott, "this here thing, it's a phone right? We'll help your little friend." Then Johnny pointed to a table in a nearby corner, out of sight from the main hallway. "Over there, bring the cards. Don't want no trouble."

"Listen, we gotta help little intern Kara! She sent a phone message to my boy here, went up to Canada for the weekend and went and lost her ID and passport," Johnny began.

"Oh my, poor thing," said Agatha. "Happened to me in the north of France one season. She'll need a new passport."

"Jacks or better to open?" The judge was shuffling the cards.

"Stay with us Judge. Pay attention. Girl lost her passport. You know somebody at State. Make the call. Scotty let the Judge use your phone. How does that work?"

"She'll need new IDs. Gotta tell her mom to get a birth certificate up to her!"

"I'll talk to the mother, poor dear, will be worried sick. Scotty, soon as we're done here, you can send Kara one of those text messages, tell her help is on the way!"

"There's a lost passport service, has expedited services, I'll call when you're done with the phone."

"Sonny, you got a passport too? Call your mamma. You and I are gonna take trip tomorrow. I know just the route. Bring that girl the papers she needs and get her back home."

"Whew! I haven't had this much fun in ages!"



The next day Scott and Johnny were on the road, documents in hand

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to ease their passage through Canadian customs with papers needed for quick turnaround of a replacement passport for Kara. Johnny knew the best route to bypass the heavy traffic and back-ups at the border crossing. Scott's text messages let Kara know that they were on the way and he made several calls to Doctor Custis to keep the Valley View residents updated. It was a long day, but they had been able to meet up with Kara, conduct the necessary business to obtain new papers and cross back to the US before dark.

"What's going on here? You're all dressed and spiffy, looking like the cat that swallowed the canary." Karen's furrowed brow and sharp tone left no doubt that she was upset about having been left out of the activities of the previous two days.

"Kara's back, we're happy to see her." Agatha and the Judge smiled knowingly as Kara poured some tea. Just then, Johnny and Scott came into the day room. The group at the table applauded.

"Where were you two yesterday?" Karen barked, as if she were admonishing a late arrival to exercise class. Johnny and Scott just smiled.

Just then Doctor Custis walked up to the group, stuffing a pack of KOOLs into her small clutch bag. "Karen, you're an OK activities director, but these kids here, they rock. We had to take care of some business. When the chips are down, we rise to the occasion. You know, this place is a veritable warehouse of wisdom."