

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/4

Charles Hayes
A Bad Lot

Watching his laying hens chase the cracked corn, Luke Oleman worries that his decision to skip college and a draft deferment to stay home with his family and help manage their Dairy business had been the wrong one. Having graduated with the high school class of 1965 a few months earlier, he couldn't see then how the Army would be interested in a Virginia farm boy who hated any kind of killing. But lately he was learning that temperament made little difference to the local draft board when it came to filling their quotas. Some of the older boys that he knew had been called up recently. Tossing the last of the feed, he kneels to pet his old border collie, Beau. Enjoying his love for his dog and animals in general, Luke remembers how a couple of their dairy cows had gotten nailed by a marauding bull when he was in grade school. And how he had stood up to his dad when his dad had wanted to slaughter the calves to save the milk. His dad had finally given in and let Luke raise the calves with their mothers separate from the rest of the herd. A year later he and the calves had won best of a new breed at the fair. And the State University had paid big bucks to have them in a new program at their Agricultural College.

Noticing the mailman pull up and stick something in their box, Luke smooths Beau's coat, stands, and goes to the mailbox with a foreboding that seems to dog him more every day. After knocking the beginnings of a wasp nest from underneath it, he opens the flap and withdraws a white envelope with a blue Department of Defense Seal printed on it. Standing in the diminishing dust from the mail truck with his stomach sinking, Luke stares at the letter that he knows is his draft notice. Slowly opening it, he tries to brace himself by thinking that Nancy will still be in college during his service. Just get it out of the way for their life later he tells himself. Reading the dreaded word "Greetings", Luke confirms that it is his induction notice. Unable to casually continue his chores, he lowers the letter and looks down at Beau. Sensing that all is not right, Beau cocks his head slightly, lifts a paw, and whines softly.

Nancy Childers had been looking forward to her weekend visit home and the chance to spend a little time with Luke. Since starting college she had missed the boy that she had loved as far back as she could remember. Now, since getting his phone call and the news of his draft notice, there was a sadness about the coming weekend that she couldn't quite shake. Telling herself the same things that Luke was saying — that it's only for two years and she'll still be in college all that time — she snaps her bag and goes to catch her ride with another student going her way for the weekend. Nancy has never really been away from home before and it will still be nice to get back to old familiar ground for a little while. The little town of Smithville doesn't have that much going for it but it is where she and Luke had spent their lives living on adjacent farms in the outlying area. And it was their home.

Waiting for her ride, she recalls how they had fished and picnicked together through the years and how they had come to love the quietness

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and solitude that they shared roaming the rolling landscape around their farms. How the dying patches of snow, like little white islands in a sea of green, provided their avenues for hiking and loving over the land. Maybe Luke was right, two years could fly by and so far lots of draftees were getting stations other than Vietnam. But Nancy was no wonderland Alice. She knew that lots were not.

Luke, riding a big roan gelding and Nancy, mounted on a smaller chestnut mare, let their mounts amble and graze along the creek that runs for miles to empty into the much larger Shenandoah. Quietly they try to enjoy this last ride before Luke leaves for the war. Despite all their hopes, it had been short shift for Luke once he finished boot camp. A draftee and no years of training to bring him up to par for specialized jobs, he was slapped with the infantry and posted to the central highlands of Vietnam to help fill the void that the increasing demands of the war were placing on America.

Coming to their favorite swimming hole, a clear pool of still water with reflections of the large sycamore trees that shelter its banks, they let the horses drink, dismount, and tie them off to some smaller trees coming up in the nearby meadow.

Just inside the lee of the sycamores there is a small raised grassy plateau that overlooks the creek and provides a look out through the trees to the meadow and land beyond. With only blankets under their arms, Luke and Nancy leave the horses and silently make their way to their grassy love spot. There, without words but with an understanding that years of togetherness has brought them, they lie together.

Under the sycamores young moist bodies dappled by the soft filtered sunlight lounge side by side, touching along their length as if one, staring through the tree tops to the patches of blue beyond. Lovely and placid they are in their repose until a sudden mutual hunger, fueled by memories and uncertain futures, brings their eyes back to one another.

"I love you," Luke says, as he watches a tear fall from Nancy's lash. "I can not remember a time when I didn't. You are my all and all to no end."

No longer immersed in the tranquil moments of after love, Nancy begins to cry openly as she swings her leg over Luke and takes him in.

"Oh my God Luke, I love you. You are my soul, my future. Please come back to me. I'm empty without you. Don't get killed, please God don't get killed."

Breathing fast, and bursting with his own emotions, Luke lets it out as well.

"I'll be back dear love, I'll be back, through heaven and hell I'll be back. Wait for me, I promise I'll be back."

Both weeping, their love tuned to a crescendo of passion and catharsis, Luke and Nancy truly escape the ordinary of their young lives.

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Out in the meadow the roan and the chestnut lift their heads from the grass and look toward the trees as the duet of a piercing cry reaches their ears.

Amid the defoliated landscape of shattered tree trunks and shell craters, Luke and an older kid from the Mississippi Delta, known as Big Daddy, bear one of the dead to the medical evacuation helicopter touching down in the A Shau Valley of Vietnam. Rocking slightly upon impact, the chopper sends a splash of blood over the edge of the deck onto the two as they load a lumpy black body bag on the slippery deck. Covered with mud and blood, the pair quickly shove the body in past the crew chief to the other waiting crewman.

Running low as the chopper lifts off, they are clear of the rotor blades when Luke suddenly stops and heaves up a stream of vomit. Big Daddy looks on as Luke, doubled over and trying to regain his stance, instead, vomits again.

Sniffing the heavy smell of puke, cordite and smoke as if they opine his thoughts, Big Daddy says, "That's right, get that blood gut outside ya where it belongs. I went through it first time too....God damn them that do this war and never see it...never smell it...never taste it stuck in their craw like a rotten chicken gizzard.....God damn them all!"

Giving Luke a modicum of privacy for his sickness, Big Daddy looks to the sky and shakes his head.

Finally catching his breath, Luke straightens up and seems to see his stretcher mate for the first time.

"You been through this before? I didn't think anything could be this bad. Else I would of gone to Canada."

Big Daddy chuckles and lays his hand on Luke's shoulder.

"Sure you would've, sure you would've. Just liken a frog would've growed wings if he'd knowed he would bump his ass so much. People like me an' you can't go to Canada. We're home boys. Now come on, let's get the rest of these bagged boys back to *their* homes."

Luke hadn't had much experience with people like Big Daddy, but they grew tight. And when they shook hands and locked eyes for the last time as Big Daddy was getting on the chopper to leave the war and go home, much had passed between them.

Setting in the door of the chopper with his feet on the landing skids as it revs up to lift off, Big Daddy slaps the top of Luke's helmet and screams above the rotor noise, "Luke, you my man, you be ok now, no sweat, but you and me and all these other poor son a bitches around here, we ain't never gonna be the same. Of all things remember that....farm boy."

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Watching his smiling friend waving from the door of the rising helicopter, Luke feels a big sorrow yet a certain jubilation that Big Daddy is making it out. And he knows that his last words are true. He will make it too.....and he will never be the same. Standing there, watching the chopper shrink to a dot on the horizon, Luke calls back a time that seems to come from another world. He remembers Nancy and their last ride together.

Newly discharged from the armed forces of the United States and still in uniform, Luke makes his way through the crowded Richmond International Airport, a choking feeling in his throat and unease in his step. The funny dress and long hair is a bit unsettling to the rigid standards he had more or less adapted to over the past two years. And some of the looks he gets are down right hostile. But the worst is the way the people seem to be going about a business that somehow excites them, gives a purpose to their steps. What is it that moves them in such a way, makes them laugh and mingle together. Luke now knows in the main what Big Daddy meant about not being the same. Here, back in the world, it spooks him as he pretends a purpose —making his way to the baggage claim to get his duffle bag.

Standing near the baggage carousel eyeing the passengers as they retrieve their luggage, Nancy, dressed in wild colors and bellbottoms, waits for Luke who doesn't know that she is there. She has driven all the way from her Northern Virginia school to surprise him and welcome him home..

Looking at the stream of people coming to the baggage area Nancy spots the uniform first and then the tall young man that she loves. All other earthly thoughts and feelings disappear as she runs toward him. A flash of brilliant hippie color, Nancy cries out her welcome as she draws near.

"Luke! Welcome home my darling love."

Seeing only a pretty young woman wearing wild colors and beads, Luke at first doesn't recognize Nancy and shies from her approach.

Startled almost to disappointment and feeling a little hurt by his cool reception, Nancy stops shy of her lover and searches his face for signs of something wrong.

"Are you alright, baby? You look scared."

"I didn't recognize you," Luke replies. "It's just this crowded airport and all the people. Makes me nervous."

"Well grab your bag and let's get out of her. We're going home in my new car."

Not really knowing the import of a new car compared to an old car, Luke shoulders his bag and listens to Nancy's excited chatter about school and the life that lies ahead of them. And as they make their way to the

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parking lot, the unease that has dogged him since his return to the world sits on his shoulder, telling him in one ear that there is something wrong with him, while he tries to hear what Nancy is saying with the other.

“Can you feel it in your legs?” Luke says. “The horses are getting old.”

Seeing Luke more like his old self, Nancy smiles and tells herself it’s going to be OK.

“Maybe a little,” she says. “I’m not the horse person that you are. But no doubt they are older.”

For some reason Luke considers her reply inadequate and feels a bit slighted.

“Well, you don’t need to be a horse person to feel a difference in your old mounts.”

Noticing his curtness, Nancy lets it pass and changes the subject.

“Do you think our spot by the creek will be overgrown?”

“Don’t think so,” Luke replies. “That’s the nice thing about sycamores. They have a natural moderating effect on their surrounding soil when it comes to overgrowth. But never mind, there is no such thing as overgrown where I been. The more there is, the better.”

A tinge of selfishness in Luke that had never been there before brings Nancy to only smile and nod. Maybe she *can* feel the difference in him. But again, she tries to ignore it.

About a hundred yards from the little raised spot among the creek sycamores Luke heels his big roan into a full gallop and yells to Nancy, “Come on babe, follow me and let the wind color your cheeks for pretty pleasure.”

Having no real choice since she is only a sometimes rider and since the chestnut pairs with the big roan on instinct, Nancy barely hangs on to the saddle horn as both horses gallop to their old hitching spots.

After tying up the horses Luke takes Nancy’s hand and pulls her inside the trees and up the small overlook.

Pulling her down roughly, Luke fumbles with the buttons to her blouse with one hand while trying to take her pants off with the other.

Feeling overlooked like never before, Nancy tries to get Luke to take a little time.

“Luke please, slow down. At least let me take my boots off first. I can take the rest off as well.”

“Oh darling,” Luke replies, “if you only knew how many times I dreamed of this.”

“Me too Luke,” Nancy replies as she removes her clothes and smooths the blankets. Lying back on the blankets, Nancy becomes a little anxious to find Luke still dressed and just staring at her nakedness.

“Aren’t you going to get undressed?”

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"No need," Luke says, as he pulls his pants down and forcibly mounts her.

To her horror, when Nancy tries to stop him, she is simply overpowered and used in a rush.

Handing Luke the reins to the chestnut after the long silent ride back to the barn, Nancy avoids his eyes and turns away. Going to her car with tears flowing down her cheeks, she gets in, starts it up and drives off. Looking ahead to the road and resisting any urge to look up to the review mirror, Nancy feels crushed and humiliated. Even now she is telling herself that this could not have happened.

Not watching her go, Luke stables the horses and heads to the dairy barn. An older and grayer Beau sits at the barn door. When Luke reaches down to pet him the old dog whines and moves away.

Eighth graders, all eager to get out of the classroom for the day, fidget and squirm as Nancy, their science teacher, tells them not to forget to study the small critters that live near their homes. As the final bell sounds, the commotion signals the end of another workday for Nancy. Feeling tired but with a sense of accomplishment, she is ready for the weekend break.

Putting away her books and charts, Nancy notices a figure at her door out of the corner of her eye. Turning in that direction, she is surprised to find a much thinner Luke standing in the doorway.

"Luke? What are you doing here?"

Trying to come up with the right words, Luke lowers his eyes for a moment then looks up.

"I'm sorry, Nancy. I made a terrible mistake, did an awful thing. Can you ever forgive me?"

Thoroughly surprised by this encounter, Nancy pretends to attend to her books while she too looks for an answer. Finally Nancy faces him and says, "Yes, you did Luke. And I don't know. I know that you had a bad lot compared to most of the rest of us. But to become so hardened, what have you got to show for your sorry?"

Though glad to see that Nancy still has her spirit and confidence, Luke has to admit, "Not much, I'm afraid. Just a strong desire for us to be the way we used to be before I thought the war gave me privileges that were wrong. I had everything wrong but ... little by little, I think I can get it right ... if you will help me. Can you find it in your heart to do that Nancy? We go back a long ways."

Walking across the room to study Luke's eyes, Nancy ponders her reply and after a long silence takes Luke's hand.

"Maybe Luke. Just maybe. After all, I am a teacher. Come on let's go get some coffee and talk about it."

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Walking down the corridor and out the doors of the school, Luke Olem and Nancy Childers emerge into the bright afternoon sunlight, like old souls from a shadowed cavern, young hearts that will smile, beat on, and accept the challenge of coming home again.