

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

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If Only

I have taken the canvas doors off the orange 1952 Willys Jeep, and now sixteen years later, the Willys is still going strong. For the first time I am driving to Easton, the city where Mom and I shop for clothing. As we pass farms, the amalgam of smells, sweet spring wheat and pungent manure, confirm that the winter is finally over.

I glance over at Mom, her light soft brown eyes studying me. The breeze teases her natural strawberry blonde hair, giving her a youthful look. I wonder if she is thinking about the days when I was small enough to stand next to her in the front seat, my left arm wrapped around her neck, her arm reaching in front of me when the car slows. As we enter Easton, a roundabout is just ahead of me. I grab the little knob on top of the long stick shift and smoothly downshift to second gear. As we exit the circle, I glance at her and she smiles, revealing a slight gap between the two front teeth. I used to have the same gap, but as soon as it appeared, my dad, a dentist, immediately sent me to the orthodontist. I am slightly regretful: if I had her smile, she would always be a part of me.

We park in the same parking lot that we always have and the attendant, his name embroidered on the pocket, gives her a top-to-bottom look, probably the reason my dad said Mom was a "real looker".

After purchasing my dress for the prom, we stroll to Straup's pharmacy, a federal architectural edifice built between the two world wars. Mirrors hang on the buffed waxed mahogany walls, and a soda fountain in the front beckons us. I don't resist spinning a few times on the red vinyl, chrome edged stool as we wait for our sundaes. We don't say much, but it is clear to any one watching us that our adoration for each other is mutual.

The ride home is too short. I ease the jeep down the earthen alley in back of our house; it jostles with every soft dip. I glance at the passenger seat as I clamber down.

But she isn't there. She died in January, yet I need to imagine that she is with me.

As I walk down our sidewalk, my dad crosses the breezeway from his dental office to the house, greeting me at the kitchen door.

"How'd it go?"

I hold up the box with my prom dress.



Eventually the Sunday hospital visits to see Mom had become more frequent. Chemotherapy kept my mother alive, but not well. During those last few years, I watched her tall, robust frame shed thirty pounds. More than ever before, I needed to experience the typical teenage girl's life that I read about in Seventeen Magazine. Maybe a coveted position on the majorette squad would ameliorate the last few years. I decided to audition for the second time.

But two days before the audition, Dad had a stroke and Mom was scheduled to have a week of chemotherapy in the hospital. Who could

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

they ask to stay with me for a week? An unlikely candidate appeared on the scene: Old Uncle Foster drove down from the Pocono Mountains to stay with me.

I knew I was doomed within the first notes of the routine. Once again I was cut.

Uncle Foster made dinner that evening, but I could barely eat, let alone talk. Trying to distract me, he told a story about his harrowing experience as a soldier on the Eastern Front during World War I. He was a victim of the Germans' first use of mustard gas and woke up in a morgue. I listened intently and concluded that a morgue would sequester me from the sadness that was smothering me.



The following year I had one parent, and not much hope that I would succeed in my third audition. I recalled the first time I leaned to the outside of the carousel, precariously balancing on the horse so my finger could snatch the golden ring, perched at the end of the rail, tantalizing me. Could I have a chance for one more ring? But I was sure my nerves would sabotage me again. I could hear my mom's warning me not to be a glutton for punishment. It was her way to protect both of us; my sadness was contagious.



At breakfast I stared at the words on the Cheerios box, the same words I read every day that week, when Dad appeared in the kitchen.

"Take this," he said. He placed two red capsules in front of me.

"What are these?"

"Librium".

"Isn't this your medicine?"

"It will calm your nerves. Help with the anxiety."

During lunch I clandestinely took the red capsule out of my purse and quickly washed it down with my chocolate milk. No one at the table noticed.

In my advanced math class, the one class that really required concentration, I hadn't missed a beat. My breathing was shallow. The chance to wear the woolen white uniform with the double row of brass buttons and punctuated by shoulder epaulets was seeming elusive.

When I heard the bell signaling the end of the final class, I rushed to the nearest water fountain, shoved the last capsule into my mouth and scurried down the hall, the sounds of staccato chattering emanating from the gym locker room.

There were twenty girls vying for four spots. Looking into the mirror, I applied my frosty pink lipstick and brushed my hair. Finally, my anxiety was beginning to soften. I isolated myself from the other girls; I didn't want their jittery excitement to affect me.

Every ten minutes, a teacher would poke her head into the locker room and call one of us to audition. Finally my name was called.

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

Six teachers were sitting at a table in the gym, including Mrs. Samson, the gym teacher with the bee hive hairdo. Last year my baton my flew out of my hand and just about bounced off her lacquered nest.

After the last girl auditioned, we sat in the locker room for a half hour. No one talked.

Finally one of the female teachers entered with a sheet of paper in her hands. I held my breath.

After listening to two names, I recognized the third. The joy flooded over me; I had been parched for years.

Once in the parking lot, I spotted my stalwart friend, the Willys. We took our time going home, savoring the euphoria.

Dad was sitting outside on the steps, waiting for me.

He smiled broadly. "Good day, eh?"

"The best," I replied, followed quickly by the thought: If only mom knew.



I often revisit that time and wonder how my dad knew that I would never take a pill, other than an ibuprofen, again. Perhaps our after school conversations, or non-conversations, gave him insight.



The following winter Dad and I patched our lives together. We took the Willys on excursions, often testing its character with brutal wintry weather. But our joy was fleeting. Nearly two years later I accompanied him in an ambulance. He died from another stroke within a week.



Still, I occasionally indulge myself with imagined conversations:

Now that I was an adult, we would stay up late, exchanging stories.

"Remember when I was in high school you would schedule a break in your appointments? I would sit on the couch and your feet would hang over the arm of the chair as you peppered me with questions, trying to pierce my teenage bubble of silence."

"Sure do."

Dad would motion with his hand to continue.

"One day, I guess in desperation, you asked, 'Did your lab partner, the Febbo kid, call you Ugly today?'"

"My lips immediately turned down, and I replied with a gloomy 'yes'. And do you remember what you did?"

"No, tell me."

"Well, you tilted your head back, slapped your knee and guffawed."

And then we would both laugh