

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

*Arthur Davis*

### **A Place In Immortality**

The barnwood structure was more a cabin, but sufficiently spacious to house Lucinda Luca's spaceship. A small, cleverly designed craft that would drop a Confederate flag on the moon and secure her and future generations of her family a place in immortality.

The house was built by her great-granddad, who fought in the Civil War. A silversmith by trade, he was a decorated captain in the Nineteenth Tennessee Infantry Regiment. He survived several major engagements and was mortally wounded in the 1862 Battle of Perryville.

The late September weather was soft and welcoming. A perfect time to launch.

Her two-hundred-thirty-acre farm harvested corn, wheat, sorghum and was part of the legacy of her family who pioneered Western Tennessee. Lucinda was of the land. A fierce woman and a recluse for most of her years.

When the local building inspector, Lucinda's uncle, stopped by weeks ago, they argued. Family aside, a legacy of bitterness was their only connection. Homer was large and loud and proud and quick to temper. He accused her of going behind his back and insisted she didn't have the necessary permits to build a spacecraft in a cabin no matter how well it was constructed. He was furious that one of his kin would purposefully and blatantly break the law and flout her disregard for his office.

"Girl, do you know how many laws you've broken here?" he said, walking around the three-stage missile. "Damn fool thing has to be taken down immediately."

He cursed her until her body stiffened rigidly. Her face flushed red. She cursed him, and only because she was prepared, was she able to get off a first round as he drew on her. Resolved and relieved, she dragged his hulking carcass outside and rolled it into the hog pen.

Lucinda made a handsome living breeding fighting hogs and had a wall of blue ribbons to prove it. Homer Hartwell paid dearly for the years he had been harassing his niece and was devoured in a frenzied bloody blur. All that remained was his silver belt buckle, crafted by Lucinda's great-granddad, a family treasure of which only a dozen were made and eight remained. The missing four had been swallowed up by history.

"Now, no one will miss him or look for him or think anything was amiss," she chanted over three small red candles which were fused together and could only be used to secure difficult wishes.

When she finished reciting the chant that went along with her wish, did she snuff out the blue-and-orange flames that crackled and sparkled and were unlike most of us had seen. The three squat candles measured but a fraction of the fire that sprang from their heart. It was a marvel to Lucinda how such powerful magic could be made real.

So distracted by her efforts, she was unable to recall the last fine meal she had eaten in weeks. That same night she feasted on lamb and duck

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and chicken and fresh vegetables, and was plagued by her failure to pick up her favorite brand of coffee-chip ice cream on her last run into town. The meal settled in her stomach as if her body had been waiting for it all her life. But there was work to be done and a ship that had to be completed, and fuel to reformulate, and prepared for the flight she had hoped would take place over the coming weekend. The next weekend at the latest. This three-week time slot offered the ideal window to launch a spaceship to the moon, so a sense of urgency gripped the young girl.

The next day Lucinda got up before dawn with a renewed sense of purpose. She pinched her cheeks until they were rosy like her mother loved. She combed out her hip-length hair and secured it with an antique French, gold-threaded, amber barrette and leaned close to the cracked mirror. She counted her freckles like she did every morning to make sure no more crept up on her in the night. Her mother had adored her fair freckles. Lucinda hadn't yet made up her mind if they made her look common or beautiful.

"Toil, oil, foil be do, I have a ship to spew," she recited over and over as day bled into night, and then night into day, until there was a rap at her front door.

"Yes," she said opening and closing the door behind her.

"Lucinda, have you seen your uncle? I think he was coming out this way," Lyle Woodson asked.

Woodson was the only reporter from the only newspaper in town, a kindly, older gentleman with nothing else to do but appoint himself Chief Investigative Reporter and find stories that few cared to read in a newspaper that hadn't printed an edition in years.

Lyle was a quiet man with few skills but great intent. He showed up every month or so and asked almost the same questions. Now, his presence was too unsettling to tolerate. Too many people beyond the fringes of her farm wanting to know too much about her business. Too many questions from too many eyes. And if the wind shifted, the scent of her dead uncle's dried blood could still poison the air.

"I did, yes, and he left, and you need to remember that and nothing else now and forever," she said with a kindly smile.

Woodson's mind churned and scattered, trying to recall how or why he was where he was. He scratched his head, trying to think something through, like you see in the movies. "You've lived around here for a while?"

"I have."

"So, have you seen anything unusual recently? Anything worth reporting?"

"Like?"

"Like," he started, then paused, more hesitant. "Maybe a flying saucer?"

"No."

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"A plane crash?"

"No."

"Bears, mountain lions, condors, eagles, cobras?"

"No."

"Comets, meteors, or asteroids?"

Lucinda was surprised Lyle knew the difference between each. "No."

"Evil spirits?"

"Ah, no."

"Flying saucers?"

"Different flying saucers than the ones you already asked about?"

"I see," he said and turned away. "Well, thanks anyway."

She had invoked a powerful incantation confirming that her uncle's disappearance would never be questioned. So was Lyle's sudden appearance a coincidence? And she had lost valuable time, if she were going to get the spaceship completed and the roof of her cabin pulled back as it was made to be so purposed, to launch the ship.

Over the rest of the day she completed a list of impossibly complex orbital calculations, using only her fingers and toes, and finished construction. That night she made adjustments to the ship's programmed trajectory, lit a match at the base of the craft, and the spaceship shot up through the dark Tennessee sky and into history.

Relieved and relaxed, a day later she was tending to her knitting on her porch when a caravan of cars pulled up the dirt road leading to her cabin. Reporters, scientists, the curious, the police, and a host of government officials wearing dark glasses made quite a fine and orderly line in front of Lucinda sitting in her aunt's old rocking chair. What she had accomplished had become an international sensation, however embarrassing every nation that had a space program years away from a successful launch.

She was polite and secretive to a fault, mostly thanking the curious for their support without divulging how she accomplished such a remarkable feat, being a woman and all. She sent them on their way, many feeling that they had gotten the answers they had come for.

The local authorities forgot about the disappearance of Homer Hartwell, the missing building inspector. He wasn't particularly well liked or respected and could be a nasty alcoholic. Most from these parts expected he would turn up in a neighboring county from a long binge and forget who he was and where he came from.

"That's all," she stood and finally said. "I have to go pee. The rest of you have to leave now."

Slowly, reluctantly, and with great disappointment, those still on the line that stretched clear past a nearby stand of spruce and birch walked back to their cars. They shuddered with anguish at what they had missed and cried themselves away from Lucinda Lucas' farm. Over the next few months quite a few fell into a terrible depression, while an equal number

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took their own lives as the crush of their failure and grasp of their miserable existence was too overwhelming to bear.

What they didn't know and couldn't possibly have known was while hundreds had gotten to question Lucinda, the girl was already working on the design for a spaceship to Mars. This time it would be designed to go to the red planet and return with geological samples.

The landing site she had chosen was the tallest mountain in the solar system—Olympus Mons. At twenty-one kilometers high, it was two and a half times taller than Mount Everest.

A year to the day later, that second spaceship took off with equal success and, with even greater anticipation, her farm was overrun by thousands of the curious and the clever who wanted to put her name on hundreds of products, promising her a fortune for the merest hint of an endorsement.

This time she was better prepared and took a piss before the avalanche of the inquisitive arrived and only spoke with the first ninety-eight in line, a number that reflected the age she had decided to live.

After the excitement of that launch settled, Lucinda put her notebooks and piles of calculations away and never built another spaceship. She opened a bakery called Nancy's Nibbles, after her most favorite aunt, in town. Her modest beginning quickly became a successful chain that made the most delicious brownies, a varied line of muffins, scones, and chocolate-chip rocket-shaped cookies.

She eventually married, had a host of devoted children, and lived happily ever after and in peace, knowing her great-uncle's silver, wrought belt buckle was resting safely on the Martian slopes of Olympus Mons.