

## Wilderness House Literary Review 19/4

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**No Keys for You**

FIRST OFF, IT WAS WAY EASIER TO GET A JOB at Glenn Haven Nursing Home than I ever thought possible. When I did the application, I entered all the jobs I had before my Master's, and for the years since, I used my creative mind that someday Norton Anthology will have to document. Pure genius in its simplicity – a totally made-up story about taking care of my former doctoral advisor, the late great Dr. James Lesser. No way to check it. He died a few months ago after a long illness, without any living relatives. Easy-peasy.

I'd learned about Glenn Haven, while slouched in the break room in Parlin's basement grading some barely literate (a)musings of my depthless freshpeople. When always-tea-never-coffee Rollo, like myself a perennial grad student, plopped himself down in front of me, with his just sniffed Honey Lavender Stress Relief teabag steeping in his giant Jacques Derrida mug. Then taking great pains in clearing his throat, like he'd long planned this conversation with a colleague scene, blurted out in his godawful nasally northeaster accent, "Hey, your guy's dying, I hear."

"My guy?" I answered incredulously.

"Weren't you doing your Ph.D. thesis on William Crowell's Southern neo-gothic humor?"

My blood pressure began to spike. This was obviously a dig aimed directly at yours truly. Note the question in the past tense. At ABD my thesis has languished, All But Dead these past few years.

"Yes, and?" I gruffly answered.

"He's in a nursing home at – what's it called? My girlfriend's mom works there. Yeah, he's at Glenn Haven and not doing too well, I hear."

"Interesting. I'd heard through the grapevine a few years back some thought he might be suffering from the early onset of dementia. Do you know why he's here, though? We're 300-some-odd miles from his usual stomping grounds."

"Don't know. Maybe he's got relatives here. Anyway, this could help you. If he dies, maybe you could get a book published about him."

"Really, Rollo? Even for you doesn't that cross some kind of line? Are you seriously suggesting I benefit from my literary hero's demise?"

"Hell yeah, why not? He's famous. Some of his novels became Oscar-winning movies. Undoubtedly, NPR already has a touching remembrance pre-recorded. And, of course, you'd not be complicit. You'll not do the deed. Age, etc. will. But you'd be an idiot not to take advantage. Like I said, a potential book deal." And here he engaged in the totally unnecessary miming of quotation marks when he said potential. A capital offense in my book.

"So what are you proposing exactly?"

"I don't know, maybe, go visit. Talk with the *auteur*, himself."

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"You're demented. The poor man is dying. Shouldn't he have some peace? The last thing America's greatest living writer would want is some grad student, no matter how brilliant, asking him even the most erudite questions on his death bed."

"I don't know. He might like it. Who knows? Maybe it's the last item to cross off his bucket list? But I withdraw the suggestion, if it's morally reprehensible to you."

"Thanks, Rollo. Now leave me to grading the remainder of these dilettantish scribblings." I then heaved my patented beleaguered writing instructor sigh to signal a final sign off.

"Well, thanks for your time. Nobody quite tells me how disgusting I am like you do. It might sound strange, but I've been missing it lately."

"I'm sure we can do this again some time, Rollo, just not now."

He nodded, grabbed a *Chronicle of Higher Education* off the coffee table and started leafing through it – no doubt to peruse the want-ads in the back. And by all appearances, I conscientiously returned to my grading. Totally for show, though. My whole being was now completely engrossed by Rollo's nearly perfect idea. No, Glenn Haven would not be a good place to visit, but it might just be the perfect place to work and, as it happened, at the perfect time. Spring Break was coming in two short weeks.



Though my janitor job's main qualification was that I had a pulse, the actual work at Glen Haven wasn't half bad if you didn't mind stuffy rooms, TVs turned up to sonic-blasting volume, and elderly people all busily going about their main job – dying. Those petty annoyances aside, from the outset, the job had one major impediment – Elvin Pedan, the head custodian, my boss, a bearded, taciturn, broad-shouldered, bear of a man. Maybe, he wouldn't have been half bad, if I hadn't got on his shit-list, the very first day.

After he showed me how to clean all the first-floor rooms, I followed him out to the dumpster in the far corner of the parking lot, both our carts loaded with trash bags. He tossed his trash in; I tossed mine. Then I felt his humongous hands on my shoulders, pushing me face first against the metal dumpster. The smell of a huge pile of trash bags all seemingly filled with very full Depends wafted into my nose.

"I want to know what the fuck you here for, man?" Elvin spat out, while his mitts melded my shoulders into the dumpster's rusted metal.

"Huh?" I very wittily retorted.

"What you here for? Drugs? Stealing from old folks? What?"

"F-f-first, Mr. Pedan," I said, my voice switching to early high-register Jerry Lewis. "I don't react well to violence. In fact, if you don't let go of me right now, I will soon be in the fetal position and most likely catatonic for several months, which, unless I'm terribly mistaken, would be totally covered by Workman's Comp."

He then let me go but made sure I stayed well within smelling distance of his Brut. After brushing some serious dumpster funk off me, I came out

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with, "You got me, Mr. Pedan. I'll now share with you the total and complete truth."

"All right, I'm listening. Out with it."

"I happen to have an addiction – to eating. I need money to eat and live like the rest of the poor, pitiful human race."

"And you, a college grad? Bullshit. You here for something. My bet is opioids. Listen, I'm going to be watching your ass every second, and I best not see anything funny. And no keys to the rooms for you. You need a key, you come talk to me. Do we understand each other, Mr. Dixon?"

At that abuse, my Southern boy upbringing immediately clicked in. "Yes, sir," I chirped.



When I finally meet America's greatest living author, should I call him, Mr. Crowell or is it better to be less formal, William or Bill, or even, (should I dare?) Billy? Then suddenly it came to me. I remembered reading somewhere that his friends called him Bud. I could call him Bud and people around wouldn't be any the wiser. Just figure I was one of those who called every male "Bud." But, of course, he would know.

After Coke's caffeine, even if it was the last listed ingredient, began to do its magic, I decided: now, right now. I took my cart to the second floor and set it outside his room. I then rapped on his door, calling out, "Custodian," as I'd been taught.

Hearing no answer, I went in. And there he was, William Crowell, propped up on his bed, watching "Judge Judy," perhaps not the most imbecilic TV program in the history of television but always in a close running for the title. The sound was turned up to approximate the volume of twin jet engines on takeoff. The judge was explaining impatiently to a young black woman about showing too much cleavage in court.

Resisting the temptation to cover my ears, I quickly swept the floor and emptied his trash bags. Then, as I was about to leave, I looked straight at America's greatest living writer and said in a stentorian voice so as to rival the TV's blaring volume, "Hey, Bud, good to see you. Hope you're having a great day, like your characters in *The Mariachi Diaries* at Cuernavaca Bar."

For a split second, William Crowell looked away from his interminably loud, moronic daytime TV to fix a look on me that appeared – how can I say it – quizzical?

Then I left him with, "See you on the flip side, Bud," like one of his picaresque characters from his early novel, *Norbert*.

Later though, while I was chunking ever more leaky, stinky trash bags into the same dumpster where earlier I'd had my near-death experience, I wondered was William Crowell's look quizzical or just uncomprehending? Or was it, instead, maybe, gas?



I'd been at Glenn Haven almost a week and still hadn't the guts for a heart-to-heart with my literary hero. I headed to the break room to caf-

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feine and courage up. Being a custodian doesn't appear to the uninitiated to be particularly taxing, but all week I've felt like I'd taught querulous freshpeople the entire day.

All there was in the break room was hours-old coffee and Styrofoam cups, so I opted for a Dr. Pepper out of the machine. After a few sips I felt like a sugared and caffeined version of myself, almost normal. Then a tech walked in and grabbed a Coke. Finally, a chance for some serious intel work. In my few days here, I'd surmised these working class folks didn't much care for my intellect. They wanted PERSONALITY!, and Dr. Pepper was helping.

"Hi!" I blurted, remembering to smile broadly. "How are you?"

She barely nodded, but before she got to the door, I came out with, "Hey, I was wondering?" Then suddenly my beautiful brain glitched. An Error Message popped up on my screen. Proof positive, this job was sapping my grey matter, but miraculously some synapse in the nether regions of my hippocampus finally sparked, and out I came with, "Uh, do you know if we have profit sharing or an IRA here?"

The tech then looked at me funny, as if I were talking about something I oughtn't. "You're the new janitor, aren't you?"

"I plead guilty," I answered, again, remembering to smile broadly – my face in actual pain from this unctuous teeth exhibitionism.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know what we get here, except low wages and crappy health insurance. Most of the patients are pretty nice old people, though."

"I guess, they sure need their TVs up loud, and the mortality rate must be high. That must be hard on you."

"It is a little," she said, taking a sip of her Coke. "Just last week, we lost Miss Ross. She'd been here three months, I think. A nice old lady. She sure had pretty skin, so clear, even as old as she was."

"How about that fellow in 236? How's he doing?"

"236? Mr. Crow? Not good. Dr. Slaughter don't think he'll be long in this world."

"Do tell. Well, nice talking to you, uh . . ."

"Louise, you can call me Lou, everybody else does. And you're?"

"Selmer, Selmer Dixon, nice to meet you. I guess I'll see you around, as they say."

"As who says?" she asked, then did a quick about-face.



So intelled and caffeined up, I strode straight to the second floor to knock on His door. This time when I came in, the TV was blissfully off. William Crowell, America's greatest living writer, was sitting up in his bed, smiling – seemingly at me. His eyes were wide open. I noticed his irises were brown with flecks of gold. Instead of being dulled by age and disease, today they seemed absolutely luminous.

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My favorite book of his, *The Sacred Order*, came to mind. At the end of that brilliant tour de force, the elderly "Poohbahs" of The Order of Euclid are strolling on a Galveston beach in a thick fog, wondering what the denizens of Stewart Beach would think if only they knew that among them walked the leaders of a sacred order. And there he was, a true poohbah of words, in his bed on the second floor at Glenn Haven Nursing Home, right in front of me.

I nodded in his direction. He nodded amiably back. I changed the trash bags in his bathroom and room, cleaning a little soap scum out of the side of his sink. On the way out, I stopped.

"Bud, I've always wondered something. What's it like?"

"Like what?" he answered with his wonderful East Texas accent, all the while giving me a knowing smile.

"To be a writer with so many gifts. Being in that zone so much. What's it feel like to be you?"

"Right now, not so great with the ominously named Dr. Slaughter hovering over me," he said, though this time his smile held more than a touch of pure melancholy. "But to answer your question, it's like being part of a club, I suppose. Like you go down to your neighborhood auto parts store – the jobbers, the mechanics (shadetree and certified), the hang-arounders. You don't have to explain to them the difference between a Ford 351-Cleveland and a 351-Windsor spark plug. They know which one's bigger, like they know an 1157 bulb is standard for turn signals. It's kinda like that. You don't have to explain to those in the craft."

"But to us, your readers, what don't we get?"

"First off, writing ain't so mysterious. It's like working on a car. Well, not these new ones with computerized insides. The old kind. Back in the day, if a car didn't start, it had to be gas, spark, or air. Started many a car just by filing away points or defouling spark plugs. Just like as a writer, you gotta spend time to get the voice right. Once you do that, though, you're on your way. Of course, later on, you have to file some of your writing down to make sure it keeps going where you want."

I was soaking it all in, bathing in his warm East Texas drawl, the room suddenly smelling of a mixture of pine trees and sweet magnolia blossoms.

"You get all that?" he asked, gracing me with another gentle smile.

I tapped at my head to say it was locked in there for good.

"I used to be a reporter, and I still think it's a good idea to write it all down. So here."

He grabbed something off his nightstand hidden under a pile of wadded Kleenexes and set it in my hands. It was a small black journal, the kind you can get at any Walgreens.

"One of my little grandnieces bought me that. Sweet of her, but there's really no point. I'll never write again. Words just seem to jog out the door before I can pin them down. But you're welcome to it."



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"Thanks."

"Don't forget to write it down now."

"I won't."



"Hey, you heard?" a grating voice announced over my phone.

"No," I mumbled, as I checked the time – 7:03 AM, way too early for a working man on his day off.

"Your guy died. Just a few miles from you. Ironic, no?"

It was Rollo. Immediately, I wanted to hang up.

"What is even vaguely ironic about a man dying near me?"

"Well, just, you know, he's your man, and he was here. You're here now. You had your chance to meet him – to seize the day – but you didn't. You never talked to him. I know you. You just kicked back and enjoyed your Spring Break. Fucking thick with irony, no?"

"Look, Rollo, irony's fine. It's a useful, though oversold literary tool, but it's not a particularly satisfying life stance, especially when we're talking about a great writer's – a real person's – death."

"Yeah, yeah," Rollo replied, as usual, bored with any conversation dealing with real emotion, not literary constructs or intellectual competitions. And, strangely, I admitted to myself that I, too, had been like that. Until now.

"Thanks for the heads-up, Rollo. I'm sure I won't be able to avoid seeing you later."

After that, I padded down the hall to my kitchen. As my teapot began to steam, I stared out my window at the world, or, more precisely, Enfield Road. In the early morning light made up almost equally of long shadows, I watched as my little slice of Austin, Tarrytown, came to life.

A mockingbird in the yaupon holly outside my door burst out with a light-hearted tune – the exact opposite of the dirge I wanted. A delivery truck pattered by, its running lights still on, its loud diesel engine revving, its gears grinding. Two college-aged women, both dressed in tights and hoodies, were walking across the street. Their young faces seemingly set in permanent grins, while their eyes filled with impish impudence. They nodded at each other's conversation as a lone cyclist with a burnt orange backpack sped by.

Life on Earth, starting anew, as if nothing of any consequence had just happened, except to me. It was then I spotted the journal on the table. I had tossed it there after I came home, too bone-weary to do anything else. I then sat down and opened it.